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How to
Melt the
Ice Queen's
Heart





“I think you look great in it.”

Kagami Asahi

火神朝陽

Curt, but never hesitates to
lend a hand to those in need.

Kagami Toko

火神透子

Asahi's Mother

Himuro Fuyuka

氷室冬華

The Ice Queen

“I'm happy to hear you say that.”

Happy Birthday!

Aiba Hinami
相葉日菜美
Chiaki's "obnoxious" girlfriend.

Asahi's best friend,
and Hinami's "obnoxious" boyfriend.

吉川千昭
Kikkawa Chiaki





**“Would it have hurt you to say
so from the start?”**

**“It suits you well, it really does.
Definitely makes you seem like you’ve got
cooking all the way down.”**



“I’m so happy that I met you, Asahi.”

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Chapter One

A Few More Nights Until It's...

Christmas was over, and New Year's was fast approaching. The holiday was just shy of a week before it arrived, verified by the sight of kadomatsu—a decoration which consisted of three closely-bounded bamboos placed on top of a straw mat—shimenawa ropes which garnished the entrance of the shrines, and kimono dresses which were worn around town. Meanwhile, the striking Santa Claus suit had begun to fade into obscurity.

Mellow festive lights would continue to illuminate the streets amidst the infamously hectic final days of the year. The sublime semblance of the kadomatsu, kindled by the modern LED strips above them, fashioned a novel aspect that treaded between tradition and innovation.

The New Year's cheer could also be seen in neighboring supermarkets, where customary New Year foods—like kagami mochi rice cakes and various, colorful dishes of osechi—lined up the storefront. Meanwhile, forgotten leftover Christmas cakes, now sold at a substantial discount, suggested the year had drawn to a close.

"A few more nights until it's New Year's Day," Asahi hummed a verse of a popular children's song to himself.

It was time to enjoy traditional New Year' activities, such as casting kites, playing with a spinning top, bouncing a ball, or enjoying a good round of battledore and shuttlecock.

Many people were filled with anticipation for the upcoming year, whereas others fretted with the heavy weight of unfinished business. Fuyuka was one such example of the latter, as she'd promised to redeem herself at cooking just one month ago.

"I'll be making food by myself today," Fuyuka declared with a piercing gaze.

"You're sure you'll be careful to *not* burn the pan this time around?" Asahi asked, making little effort to hide his skepticism.

“I’ll be fine.”

“You won’t mess up the seasoning either?”

“No, I won’t.”

“And you won’t spill oil everywhere?”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re making fun of me.”

“Nah, just listing every mistake you’ve made up until this point.”

“So you *are* mocking me,” Fuyuka grumbled, pouting a little in protest.

Asahi would be forgiven to assume they’d grown closer over the spell of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day—they’d spent the holidays together, after all. Still, Fuyuka’s attitude hadn’t truly changed much. Her transient cheerfulness, which peeked through the layers of melted snow of her frigid personality, led him to believe that her current good nature was simply an instance of embracing the holiday spirit.

Either way, there was no way Asahi could determine the subtleties of their relationship—not when Fuyuka visited his apartment every night to have dinner together.

I know we’re good friends, at least. I mean, we’ve grown to know each other, and we’ve spent so much together and all, Asahi thought. “I was just messing with you. No need to get all bent out of shape about it.”

“I’m not,” Fuyuka retorted.

“A little grumpy then?”

“Where did you get *that* idea?” she said, looking away from Asahi.

“Hit the jackpot, huh?” he forced a smile.

Asahi could sympathize with her at the end of the day. Inhibiting a student’s enthusiasm was hardly a commendable trait for a teacher, after all. Besides, Fuyuka’s cooking skills had been showing steady signs of promising growth. Of course, it had been largely in part to his thorough teaching, but he couldn’t discredit her ability to rapidly improve with daily experience.

She’s still pretty rough around the edges, but I can confidently say that she’s

got the basics down, Asahi mused.

Her past blunders didn't exactly inspire confidence, but he finally settled on letting her have her way. Meanwhile, Fuyuka had already begun making preparations in the kitchen.

"I get that you're eager, but what brought up the whole thing anyways?" he asked.

"I feel confident enough in myself, and I want to show you what I'm capable of now."

"Whoa, now you've got me interested," he said. They hadn't gone shopping that day, so they were limited by what little ingredients they had in the fridge. That left Fuyuka to try her hand at a certain familiar dish—curry. "So you're giving curry another shot?"

"Yes," she answered. She was determined to succeed in her second attempt at preparing curry and make it the highlight of their closing year. "You can go relax on the sofa for the time being."

"What? I'm not allowed to stand next to you?"

"No. I can't focus if you're around."

"C'mon, I'll just be looking from the side."

"You say that... but then you'll start meddling, just like you always do."

"Point taken."

"I thought so. That's why the kitchen is off-limits until I'm done!" Fuyuka asserted, then pushed Asahi out into the living room. She rolled up her sleeves, opened the recipe book, and prepared the vegetables—potatoes, onions, and carrots. "Hey, no peeking!"

"Damn, was it that obvious?"

"Very much so," she glared at him holding a knife, compelling him to raise his arms in surrender.

I think I'll really get on her bad side if I keep joking around, so I'll just sit down and wait for her to call for me, he concluded.

An assortment of emotions grew and swirled unchecked in his head. As a concerned party, he was both keen to see where she stood ability-wise *and* afraid for her well-being at the same time. All of his conflicting feelings served to heighten his excitement.

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A few hours passed. Finally, a plate of curry, succulent in its aroma, was placed on the table for Asahi to relish.

“Let me know what you think,” Fuyuka said, standing next to him with an expression of both anxiety and tension. Her hands were clasped together near her chest, as if she was a praying nun; the image was further propagated by her choice in dark, modest loungewear.

“Sure thing,” Asahi replied.

With that, he began to eat. His opinion could be easily gathered based on the quick, eager spoonfuls. He had no major criticism of anything he tasted—the vegetables were wonderfully savory, the curry sauce was thick and rich, and everything was nestled in the piquant, subtle smell of the spices.

“This is incredible,” he said.

“Y-You’re not just flattering me, are you?”

“Have I ever sugarcoated my real thoughts for you?”

“You haven’t, but...”

“I’m being honest here. The curry you made is killer,” Asahi complimented.

Fuyuka’s eyes widened upon hearing his praise, and her face brightened up into a smile. “Hooray,” she whispered, striking a moderate fist pump from under the table... or so Asahi assumed.

Anybody who would be happy to have their food complimented, and Fuyuka’s no different, he mulled.

“Looks like I managed to get it right this time,” she noted with an innocent laugh. Her grin was so lovely that Asahi’s mouth curled as well.

“But, yeah—you’ve gotten pretty good. You been doing any special practice

behind my back?”

“Of course. I make sure to review what you’ve taught me and practice beforehand.”

“Huh. That explains it.”

“Although, naturally, it all comes down to your great tutoring.”

“Nice try. Too bad flattery won’t put you in my good books.”

“It doesn’t need to—I meant what I said.”

“In that case, I’ll take your word for it,” he replied, accepting her compliment. Truly, Fuyuka’s progress had been remarkable as of late. Her knife-handling skills, in particular, had been honed to the point where Asahi felt confident leaving her with one unsupervised. “I honestly feel fine leaving you to cook on your own now that you’re this capable.”

“N-No way! There’s still so much I’d like you to teach me. Daily, if at all possible...” she objected in an unfamiliarly loud voice.

“Someone’s eager. Welp, not that I mind or anything. I’m pretty free most of the time,” Asahi reassured her with a nod.

Fuyuka’s expression softened in relief, gradually melting into a soft smile. Asahi mirrored her.

It makes me happy that she’s so willing to learn. No idea if she’ll stick to her word and actually come by every day for a lesson, but heck... I’m here to help as long I don’t have anything else to worry about—

Asahi’s face soon fell into a slight frown as he recalled the upcoming plans he had already arranged. He hesitated for a moment, though his doubt was promptly erased. They needed to be on the same page.

“Say, got anything planned for New Year’s?” he asked.

“Nothing, I’m afraid. I’ll just be staying in my apartment,” she said, her smile vanishing.

It doesn’t sound like she can’t be with her family because the trip’s too far or something. It’s clear that she’s got some problems with them, he noted to

himself gloomily. It was as if she couldn't be with them, or rather, didn't *want* to. Whatever the case, it was never his intention to make her sad.

"Wouldn't you know it? That makes two of us," he said.

"You won't be going back home to your family this year?"

"I was supposed to... until my parents decided they'd come visit *me* instead," he explained. It had been some time since their last visit, and they wanted to see how he was holding up, or so they'd told him. Asahi's apartment was originally supposed to house the three of them, and he'd been keeping their rooms clean in the event that they decided to sleep over at any time. "I say that, but they've got the restaurant to worry about. They'll just pop in around noon and then go back, apparently."

"Still, that sounds wonderful. I'm sure they're looking forward to spending quality time with you."

Not gonna lie, it really weighs on me that my parents are gonna be the ones showing up here first thing next year... but it might just work for the best, he thought. "So anything specific you'd like to eat on New Year's Eve and Day?"

Despite his question, Fuyuka didn't appear to fully grasp what was asked of her—or perhaps she did, given her shocked expression.

"Come on, weren't you the one who *just* said you wanted daily lessons?" he added bluntly.

Fuyuka nodded in response. "I'd... love to have some traditional toshikoshi soba noodles," she said with a pleasant grin.

"That'll be a first for me, too. I've never made soba before."

"Kneading noodles sounds really fun. I can't imagine I'll have much trouble, either. What do you think?"

"Maybe... if you're patient enough."

"‘Maybe’?" she parroted.

"Yeah. There's no telling what'll happen once *you* go at it."

"Teasing me again, are you? Hmph," Fuyuka grumbled with an angry glare.

Although her sulking didn't particularly faze Asahi, a certain issue sprang to mind which led him to voice his concerns.

"You sure you're fine celebrating New Year's with me?" he inquired.

"Now that you mention it..." her voice trailed off as the realization seemed to dawn on her. Her eyes darted across the room before eventually settling on Asahi. She peered up at him timidly. "Is it all right with you?"

"I don't mind at all," he answered.

They would not only have dinner together on New Year's Eve, but they'd now agreed on spending time together until the New Year's countdown. The prospect opened its own can of worms.

It'll be pretty late at night, which we've never done up till this point.

Fuyuka, blissfully unaware of Asahi's musings, beamed with happiness; she resembled a child ardently awaiting the New Year. Her gloomy disposition from a moment ago had vanished into thin air, and it pleased him to see her in such high spirits again.

"Thank you for the meal. It was delicious," he said, bringing his hands together in prayer after he'd completely finished his plate.

"I hope I'll have more opportunities to cook for you again in the future," she replied while mimicking Asahi's gesture.

"I can hardly wait."

Asahi locked eyes with Fuyuka. They both enjoyed the laid-back serenity of the room, unburdened by the frantic nature of the last remaining days of the year.

Chapter Two

...New Year's Day

The calendar marked the 31st of December—New Year's Eve, in other words.

The closing day of the year had always been an exceptional occasion. With just one step outside, the jubilant hubbub of the masses could be heard down the streets. The New Year's spirit inevitably seeped inside the houses, as well, and populated the news rounds on TV and social media alike.

Should New Year's Eve really feel more special now that I'm spending it with someone this time? Asahi contemplated. "Man, it's been a busy year."

Asahi's murmurs echoed through the room before fading away. The recollections of various recent events gave him a pleasant, warm feeling on the inside; meanwhile, the boiling water of the bath he was submerged in supplied warmth of another variant.

I've spent so much time looking back at what happened over the year that I'm actually starting to feel dizzy, he thought.

Asahi had made plans to spend New Year's Eve together with Fuyuka. They'd agreed that Fuyuka would leave for a while after the splendid dinner they'd enjoyed, and then they'd meet up again once she'd gotten ready.

"Should probably step out of the bath," he decided. He stood up once he'd warmed up enough, causing agitated ripples and splashes from where he'd once sat.

He took a quick shower and exited the bathroom, still dripping wet. Fortunately, the droplets that trickled down his body landed onto the diatomite bath mat he'd spread on the floor. The mat promptly absorbed the water and evaporated it. *One of the best items around if you're living alone. Doesn't even need to be washed.*

The only thing left to do was to dry himself using the towel he'd readied beforehand, put on some clothes, and dry his hair with a blow-dryer... or, at least, that *had* been the plan until Asahi realized two things. First, he had

forgotten to prepare a change of clothes, and second, the intercom was ringing.

“Crap, I gotta put something on,” Asahi mumbled as he hurriedly wiped the rest of his body. Since he wasn’t all too keen on running around the apartment naked, he wrapped a towel around his waist before checking who was at the door.

However, it was at that moment where another realization, or rather, a certain question crossed his mind. *Wait. Did I remember to lock the front door...? I have a bad feeling about this.*

As it would turn out, his fears were well-founded.

“Honestly, Asahi—you need to make sure you’ve locked the door behind you. What if some burglar entered the apartment?” Fuyuka complained.

Asahi’s ears couldn’t properly register her words. Fuyuka, for her part, froze in bewildered shock as a mostly-naked Asahi—save for the towel—stood in front of her.

“Sorry about that. I’ll be extra careful next time,” Asahi apologized, opting to bow his head as a cacophony of emotions wreaked havoc within his mind.

“Go change into something first and we’ll talk about this later!”

Her shriek, although very much warranted, rang throughout the apartment and into the bathroom behind him. Her face was so red that Asahi could’ve sworn *she* was the one who’d just gotten out of the bath.

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“I know that I’m at fault for barging into the apartment, but that wouldn’t have happened if you’d remembered to lock the door behind you. You should take part of the blame! I didn’t see anything, by the way! And even if I *had*, it was only a slight peek, and I’ve already wiped it clean from memory!” she rambled without seeming to take a pause for breath.

Asahi’s features contorted into a stiff smile in response. He returned to his room to put on some clothes and dry his hair.

After a while, they relaxed on the sofa and the situation began to calm down. Still, his heart refused to stop beating like mad; largely in part to how novel

Fuyuka seemed.

The sweet scent of roses wafted from her slick, black hair, and her ever-translucent skin had taken on a slight, yet nonetheless seductive, reddish tint. Her attire was also quite eye-catching—although she was dressed in loungewear, the light pink boa fleece material was both snug and stylish as it wrapped itself up warmly around her delicate body.

Although Asahi was used to seeing her in casual clothing, this was the first time he'd met with her right after she'd taken a bath. He was frozen in place, unable to take his eyes off of her.

"Umm... You're staring at me so much it's starting to make me feel embarrassed," she mumbled, hanging her head down to hide her face.

"Crap, my bad. It's just that you look kinda different," he swiftly apologized.

"I could say the same for you, too."

"Huh, really? I think I look the same as always, personally."

"That's not true at all. You've combed your hair and you're in your pajamas for a change," she noted. She stole a peek at him before adding, "I'm surprised that you're hiding some muscle under there."

"You didn't have to word it like *that*."

"You aren't in any clubs, so it was a bit unexpected."

I guess she's got a point. It's not like my regular routine would help me build any type of muscle, but... seems like the little bit of training I've been doing in my free time has paid off!

"I don't mean to tease you, or anything. I'm praising you, actually," she added.

"Thanks, I guess. Hold up, didn't you tell me you wiped it from your memory?" he replied, electing to tease Fuyuka to cloak his bashfulness.

"I-I just did, I swear!" she shook her head in panic, her face painted deep crimson once more.

The evening grew late as they spent the remainder chatting and watching TV.

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“For some reason, I’m slightly craving a bowl of cereal right now,” Fuyuka said.

“What a coincidence—I was just thinking the same thing.”

“It seems like we have tomorrow’s breakfast all planned out, then.”

“What, we’re putting corn flakes on the top of the list of first things to eat on New Year’s? Seems a little out of place, doesn’t it?” he asked.

“Hehe, you’re probably right about that.”

They both watched the actors on TV tell jokes. Asahi could hear pleasant, charming laughter from right beside him. Fuyuka—who was clearly unfamiliar with comedy shows—sat on the edge of the sofa, enjoying the lively sketches of the year-end-special.

Damn, the smile won’t leave her face, he noted. Asahi was convinced that her typically-displayed “Ice Queen” exterior must take a considerable toll on her, and that the lovely, beaming girl sitting next to him was, in fact, closer to her real personality. She’s changed so much in a span of a few months.

“Umm, why isn’t this actor wearing any clothes?” she asked.

“He’s performing a bit. Never heard of this act before? It’s pretty common on comedy shows.”

“B-But performing with nothing but a tray as cover is taking things a little too far...” she grumbled and buried her face into the cushion, trembling in a sheepish manner.

Guess she has a pretty low tolerance for nudity... especially considering she was as red as a tomato when she saw me without a shirt on.

Fuyuka tugged on his heartstrings each time he got to know a new side of her. Every cute gesture or change in expression left him pleasantly surprised.

“Asa... hey, Asahi?”

“Hm?”

“We need to start preparing the toshikoshi soba,” she said.

“Whoa, it’s already this late?”

“Yes. The New Year will come and go if you keep spacing out like that,” she reprimanded him, pointing at the clock on the wall which steadily closed in on midnight.

Not much left to do to prep the noodles, anyways. We just gotta boil them and let them soak in broth for a bit, he thought.

They both headed to the kitchen and divided the work between them. Asahi tasked himself with making the broth, while Fuyuka was placed on boiling duty. The food preparations moved ahead efficiently and without a hitch.

“Look at this one, Asahi! I’m very proud of it!” she exclaimed with a grin—a new expression of cheerfulness that differed from the one she’d had when she’d watched TV.

“I gotta say, it’s looking great,” he said, following up with a smile of his own. It warmed both his heart and body to see her happy. In fact, he felt a certain, unique sense of comfort when he was with Fuyuka that was quite dissimilar from when he hung out with Chiaki and Hinami.

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“Just a few more minutes until it’s the New Year’s,” he remarked.

“It’s finally happening.”

Asahi and Fuyuka were both reclining upon the sofa after they’d enjoyed their meal of toshikoshi soba. The noodles had been pleasant—both chewy in texture and extremely flavorful due to the dashi present in the broth.

The TV broadcast they’d tuned into ushered in the realization that the year was coming to an end. The camera highlighted the buzzing crowds that were walking around a famous shrine’s grounds, coupled with the solemn ringing of the joya-no-kane—an ancient custom where a temple bell is rung 108 times on New Year’s Eve.

“It feels somewhat strange to greet the new year together, doesn’t it?” she asked.

“I know what you mean. I never would’ve expected it, given how you were a

few months back.”

“C-Can’t we consider that water under the bridge?” she pleaded in a low voice.

Despite her objections, Asahi could never truly forget.

It had all started when he’d nursed her back to health after she’d fallen ill with a fever. After that incident, Fuyuka had gradually allowed him to meddle in her life, and they’d deepened their relationship. The result was obvious, given that she now sat next to him at his house. Asahi cherished every little interaction they had together, even when she was still “The Ice Queen.”

A pleasantly warm, comfortable atmosphere predominated the room. They both broke into smiles.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me this year, Asahi,” she said.

“Same here. You were a great help,” he replied, returning her heartfelt gratitude. “Say, you got any New Year’s resolutions?”

“Maybe one. I want to become as skilled as you are at cooking.”

“That’s a good one. Might take you a few years to make it a reality, but hey.”

“Although it hurts me to admit it, you’re not wrong. Still, I’m confident that I’ll get there if you continue to tutor me,” she pointed out.

Which means... we’re gonna keep this up next year? Maybe even longer? Asahi’s intention had been to tease her with his previous comment, but she’d blindsided him with her counter. He could feel himself blushing. *Whatever the case, seems like we’ll be spending more time together.*

“I’m really looking forward to next year’s lessons,” she said, her eyes closing to half-moons as she smiled endearingly. Asahi’s heart was set ablaze with an undefinable emotion he’d never experienced before.

I can’t put my finger on it. Chiaki and Hinami are also my friends, but this is definitely a different feeling from when I’m with them. Whatever the enigmatic sensation was, it flickered in Asahi’s vision like a quivering mirage in the distance. *I still feel I’m getting closer to figuring it out. I’m sure I’ll get to the bottom of it someday, one step at a time.*

“Ten, nine, eight...” several voices on the TV began counting in unison, snapping Asahi out of his thoughts. “Seven, six, five...”

Asahi and Fuyuka stood shoulder-to-shoulder, waiting for them to finish.

Four, three, two, one... brilliant fireworks lit up the night sky as the countdown reached zero. The brilliant display was accompanied by the deafening sound of the temple bells which rang for the final 108th time.

“Happy New Year!” “Hope you have a wonderful year ahead!” Asahi and Fuyuka blurted at the same time, straightening their posture for the standard bow.

Alerts from Asahi’s phone—which had been left on the table—began a set of rhythmic beeps at the same time.

Must be a message from Chiaki or Hinami or something, Asahi told himself.

Prompted by Fuyuka, he picked up his phone. His assumptions were immediately validated—it *was* from the “Obnoxious Couple.” They, along with a few other of his close friends, wished him a happy new year. He scrolled further down and saw a few notifications from a chat group labeled, “The Kagami Bunch.”

Asahi decided to check his parents’ messages so he could reply to them. As he examined his phone, his expression grew increasingly perplexed, and he exclaimed, “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Just got a message from my parents. They’re coming to visit and spend the night.”

“It’s shaping up to be a bustling New Year’s Day.”

“I just hope they don’t get *too* excited and disturb the neighbors,” he groaned. *I say that, but they’re adults. They know their manners and all, so I’m sure it’ll be fine... Nah, I take that back. My dad and common sense are polar opposites. He’ll lose his mind just like he did on Christmas Eve if he comes across Fuyuka who happens to live next to me. I don’t see mom reigning him in if that happens.*

“I suppose that means that today’s lesson is postponed,” she said. “I’ll just stay in my apartment.”

“Yeah. Sorry for that, especially on New Year’s Day.”

“No, no, don’t worry about it,” she reassured him.

They’d both reached the same conclusion: if Fuyuka didn’t visit, then they’d avoid another incident like when she’d bumped heads with Chiaki and Hinami during their stay at Asahi’s apartment.

Man, she looks kinda sad. I thought my parents would show up at noon, then return to the restaurant. I wanted to spend the evening with her. I really did. But now she’ll be all by herself, he brooded, guilt-tripping himself over the abrupt change in their schedule.

*Can’t we find some middle groun—*his contemplation was interrupted by the familiar intercom bleep. “Who could it be at this hour?” he asked cautiously.

Asahi hadn’t invited anybody but Fuyuka, and he couldn’t for the life of him think of an acquaintance who would drop by at this hour. That left him with one of two possibilities: either it was the first prank of the year, or some sketchy, unsavory visitor.

He tossed Fuyuka—who was visibly anxious—a reassuring glance, then attempted to discern the visitors through the intercom’s monitor. Up popped a large, boisterous man, and a stern-looking woman looking into the camera.

“So who is it?” Fuyuka inquired.

“My mom and dad.”

There was a pause, and her eyes widened in shock. “Did I hear you correctly?”

“Yup.”

“I thought they were coming over at noon.”

“So did I. I’m pretty confused myself, honestly.”

“Well, let’s open the door for them. We can worry about the other details later.”

“Wait, wait, wait, hold up! If we open it right now, they’ll see you here with

me!”

“O-Oh, you’re right. What should we do? We’re backed up against the wall.”

“Okay, what if you hid in the bathroom and waited for the right chance to—crap, no. They’d find out if they use the bathroom. Maybe if I hid you in my room... tch, no. It’s too far away from the entrance,” he mumbled. The intercom chimed a second time as he tried to conjure up a solution. “I’m just gonna talk to them for now and see what happens.”

He approached the monitor and enabled the speaker, “Asahiii, you there? It’s your old man at the dooor!” Kazuaki’s roaring voice erupted, causing Asahi to flinch and pull his ear away.

“Why are you guys here? I thought you were coming over at noon!” Asahi cried.

“I’m sorry, is *that* the first thing you say to your parents on New Year’s?” Toko scolded him.

“Happy New Year, Mom,” Asahi replied after a pause.

“Mhmm. Happy New Year.”

“Can you hear me, Asahiii? Happy new *rear*!” Kazuaki butted in with a joke unfitting for his age.

“For God’s... Dad, you’re not twelve. Where did you even hear that from?!”

“Did you get our message? We just texted you saying that we’re spending the night here,” Toko said.

“Yeah, I thought you were stopping by at *noon*, not in the middle of the night,” Asahi grumbled.

“I know we’re late, but we wanted to close up earlier so we could greet the New Year together,” Kazuaki explained.

“Too bad your dad took his sweet time composing a new menu.”

“Sorry about that—once the chef in me gets rolling, it’s hard to stop!”

Not gonna lie, it’s pretty annoying they felt the need to pop in on such short notice. They’re here to be with me, though, so I can’t exactly complain...

"Anyway, let us in. We're freezing out here in the cold," Toko said.

"Umm, about that..." Asahi floundered.

"Speak."

"Sorry. I'm just, y'know... not finished cleaning up yet."

"No need. We're not strangers. Just open the door for us."

"You don't get it, Toko. A guy his age is bound to have a thing or two he doesn't want his parents to see," his father chimed in.

"Zip it, Kazuaki. That is *not* the case here. Something is off. Are you keeping something from us, Asahi?"

Kazuaki's shoulders drooped in dejection when his wife cut him off.

"Why would you put it like that? You don't leave me any choice *but* to deny it," Asahi argued, trying to play it cool so they wouldn't suspect a thing.

"Good point," Toko replied. While suspicion still marked her visage, Asahi's nonchalant act won out in the end. "It *is* our fault for coming by so suddenly. We'll wait for you out here. Call us when you're done with whatever you're doing."

Asahi and Fuyuka both breathed a sigh of relief the moment Toko's voice faded away.

Okay. We got through that hurdle, but we're not outta the woods yet. I only managed to buy ourselves some more time.

Asahi was so busy wracking his brains that he didn't notice Fuyuka poking his side, presumably with the desire to pitch an idea to him.

"Umm, why don't I wait here for the time being?" she asked, mustering a smile to mask her nervousness.

"You sure you don't wanna hide somewhere? They'll swarm you. It'll get rowdy."

"I-It does sound tough, but I think I can manage. Besides, there's nothing else we can do. I'm sure your parents will understand."

"Hey, if you say so, then it's fine by me. You sure pick weird times to act all

bold,” he said with a sigh. He resigned himself to the reality of the situation, or —perhaps more accurately—seemed perplexed by it all.

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“Yeah. For example, have you ever looked at yourself holding a kitchen knife? You swing that thing like some fearless swordsman.”

Fuyuka didn’t reply.

“I’m joking, chill with the death glare,” he replied. *I tried to be thoughtful and come up with something since I know she doesn’t like being around people, but she just said she’s fine with it. Guess I worried over nothing... Only problem is the barrage of questions they’ll have for us. Then again, it’s not like we did anything wrong. We don’t have anything to hide. I’m sure they’ll unwind once we tell them the truth.* “All right, let me get the door.”

Fuyuka gave a slight nod, her face revealing her tenseness. That was when Asahi came up with a brilliant idea.

“Since they’re gonna find out either way, why not stay for New Year’s? We can have lunch and dinner together too,” he suggested. *I was pretty worried about leaving her alone on New Year’s, but now that my parents are gonna know she’s here, why not have her join us?*

“Are you sure your parents wouldn’t mind? I don’t want to intrude on the three of you while you’re enjoying your time as a family together.”

“Would they mind? If anything, they’d be delighted.”

He wouldn’t mind having her around, so he could easily imagine his parents’ reaction. As both chefs and parents, they’d be over the moon to have a female guest accompanying their son.

“Oh yeah, by the way—my parents are going to cook, so it’s gonna be pretty fancy. You don’t wanna miss it.”

Asahi wasn’t sure if his last line sealed the deal.

Fuyuka unpursed her lips, nodded, and said, “Well, if you insist. I’ll accept your invitation.”

Asahi left a faintly-smiling Fuyuka and made his way to the entrance of the

apartment. He opened the door to welcome in his parents. It didn't take his mother long to notice that something was out of order.

"Whose shoes are those?" she asked.

"My guest's. I've got someone over, that's why I didn't let you guys in right away."

"There's only one pair, and they seem quite feminine. Were you celebrating the New Year's with her?"

"That's the gist of it, yeah."

"I see," she replied.

Toko had been able to deduce the specifics from the limited information she had access to. Kazuaki, on the other hand, had difficulty following along.

"A girl? You have a *girl* with you here right now?! Did we come at a bad time? Should we turn around and leave?!" Kazuaki yelled in a wild, over-exaggerated fashion.

"Dad, please, the neighbors!"

"U-Ugh, sorry."

"Anyway, come in. She's waiting for us inside," Asahi beckoned them in.

They took off their shoes and proceeded to the living room which was at the end of the corridor.

"H-Hello there, Mr. and Mrs. Kagami. It's been some time! I hope I won't bother you by being here!" Fuyuka blurted out, adding an awkward bow.

Toko—rarely enough—wore a relieved expression. Kazuaki, on the other hand, was utterly shocked. He bellowed out his loudest scream of the day yet.

*

It was the next morning. Asahi's parents had risen from bed very early to start the elaborate process of preparing the osechi. Asahi was deeply grateful and happy... to a certain extent, at least.

In a wholly unforeseen twist of events, the two parents who'd come knocking at the door in the middle of the night were keenly interested in the girl who was

in their son's apartment.

We were together until super late. It was a pain trying to explain the whole deal to them.

The clock had moved well past 1:00AM by the time his parents had finished bombarding Asahi with all manners of thorough, inquisitive questions. Fuyuka, not used to staying up so late, had fallen asleep on the spot. She'd been subsequently permitted to retire much earlier on one condition—that she promised to return again around noon.

Asahi and Fuyuka sat next to each other, a pair of strained smiles painted on their faces. Still, Asahi noted a slight change in the girl.

She's more loosened up, from what I can tell. Must be because she was invited here again by my parents.

"The osechi will be ready in a jiffy!" Kazuaki's bright, hearty voice boomed from the kitchen.

"Sorry to come and ruin the romantic mood you two had," Toko, who was sitting right in front of the two, said dryly.

"Come on, we literally explained everything to you guys. It's not like that," Asahi objected.

"Really? Correct me if I'm wrong, but weren't you telling me that you've spent so much time together that you're practically roommates?"

"Nope. Nobody said anything like that."

"I-It really isn't like that!" Fuyuka added.

"I'm sorry, what?!" Kazuaki chimed in.

"You're not part of this conversation. Focus on cooking," Toko commanded.

"Yes, ma'am."

The living room—which was too spacious for one person living on their own—was perfect for accommodating four people at once. Unfortunately for Kazuaki, he was currently separated from the others because the kitchen was so far away. Some would argue that it served him right, what with the annoying,

abrasive racket he'd caused the night before.

Man, it's been real rough ever since they rang that damned interphone, Asahi whined to himself.

"I never would've expected Fuyuka to be your neighbor. Not in a hundred years," Toko said, her mouth upturned ever so slightly. Kazuaki also nodded vigorously in agreement while casually handling the frying pan. "So tell me, Fuyuka. Asahi has been teaching you how to cook?"

"Y-Yes! I owe him quite a lot!" Fuyuka answered.

"I see, that's nice. I worried if he even had the makings of a teacher. He's usually blunt and comes off as cold."

"I'm sitting right here, you know," Asahi objected.

"I'm only telling the truth."

"Well, can't say you're wrong."

Naturally, he was the one who was the most aware of his own nature. *I mean, I was raised by an equally cold and blunt parent, so it's obvious I'd turn out the same... though it scares me to think I could've had my dad's wild personality.*

"If you have any complaints about Asahi, don't hesitate to tell me. I'll make sure he works on them. Okay?"

"O-Oh, no, he's been nothing but an amazing teacher. But you *are* right when you said he's blunt..."

"You too, Fuyuka?" Asahi groaned.

Although little could be done about his monotone pitch and usual phrasing, he always did his best to pick his words carefully around her. Given how she'd sided with his mother, though, it didn't seem that his consideration had mattered.

I might be a good teacher, but I still have places where I can improve, huh?

"His kind heart makes up for everything, though," Fuyuka added after a pause, her head hung down in embarrassment.

"Hmm. I get it now," Toko responded.

“Get what?” Asahi asked.

“You know. Things.”

Asahi soon understood that Toko and her ambiguous replies, for all her craftiness, came from a place of consideration. A thin smirk lined his lips.

I'd say she's got something on her mind, but I'm not about to ask. She already squeezed all the answers out of us, and I'm not about to feed into any more doubts she has.

“You have my blessings, Asahi.” Toko nodded to herself, shifting her gaze between Fuyuka and her son.

“I really don't get what you're talking about.”

“Just showing my support for teaching Fuyuka how to cook. And the *other* thing,” she teased in her typical deadpan tone while staring Fuyuka in the eyes.

Fuyuka, who was seated next to Asahi, began to blush in response. He could only speculate as to why.

It's like they're speaking with their eyes or something. Regrettably, he couldn't understand the contents of their secret conversation.

“All right everyone, gather 'round! Sorry for the wait, ladies and gents! Today's luxurious main course, the osechi, is now served!” Kazuaki exclaimed.

Ultimately, Asahi was unable to gather what Fuyuka and his mother had hinted at. Instead, he chose to focus his attention on the triple-tiered lacquered boxes stacked atop each other; also known as jubako.

The table—which was encircled by many more people than usual—was garnished with assortments of dishes associated with good omens. The meal featured bright-red skewered kuruma prawn, black soybeans, broiled fish cake, dried sardines, seaweed with herring roe, rolled omelet mixed with fish paste, and mashed sweet potatoes with chestnuts.

“Now, now, don't be shy, Himuro! Eat to your heart's content!” Kazuaki encouraged the girl.

“Kazuaki put a lot of effort into it, so we want you to enjoy it,” Toko added.

The current atmosphere that emanated was incredibly peculiar. It bore a resemblance to the feeling one would expect when enjoying a meal with friends or family. And despite Fuyuka's presence at the Kagami dinner table being nothing short of unusual, it felt strangely homely and comforting.

"Let us eat," Fuyuka said, elegantly joining her hands together. She appeared tense, yet somehow comfortable with the boisterous crowd.

*

"Sorry you got dragged into that mess yesterday," Asahi muttered, apologizing to Fuyuka immediately after he'd opened the door.

It was the next day. Kazuaki and Toko had already left just as quickly as they'd come storming in like a hurricane.

"Hehe. There's no need for an apology. It wasn't your fault."

"I appreciate you saying that, but I'm sure the noise drove you crazy."

"I wouldn't say they were noisy, per se... just a bit excited."

"Same thing when you look at it. They're still ridiculously loud."

"Well, either way, I enjoyed myself. The time I spent with them was just as wonderful as their cooking," Fuyuka remarked as she reached for the brilliantly-colored ratatouille.

Asahi took a bite himself. The concentrated tang of the ingredients spread throughout his mouth and breathed warmth into his very core.

The table was loaded with a plethora of other... *unique* dishes. There were boiled eggs, spinach gratin, and pork rilette, just to name a few. Needless to say, each and every one of them had been meticulously prepared by his parents.

They wanted to cook for me from time to time. At least, that's what they told me, Asahi reflected. He felt like it had been a declaration of sorts. They would also be saddened if he forgot what a family-prepared meal tasted like. My dad wouldn't stop pestering me to share the food with Fuyuka when he was leaving. I mean, I think it's a bit over the top, but hey. I'm not the kind of guy to defy his parents' good intentions just because. Besides, I was gonna call her over

anyways.

“It’s amazing,” he remarked.

“And makes you feel warm and snug on the inside, too,” Fuyuka noted with a grin. She conveyed her rather abstract impressions with a cup of corn soup in her hands.

Asahi took another mouthful of the ratatouille and indulged its sentimental taste.

I’ve heard that French cuisine retains its original flavor, even when it’s a few days old. It definitely lives up to that claim. Hell, it tastes two times better. But I guess that’s what happens when you’ve got a master chef in the kitchen.

Yesterday had proved to be an exhausting start to the New Year, but that wasn’t to say it hadn’t come with some perks. Asahi’s parents had prepared a few dinners’ worth of marvelous food for him aside from the New Year’s osechi.

Even Fuyuka doesn’t seem to be bothered at all with what happened, so I’m not complaining.

“You, your father, and your mother... all of the Kagamis prepare exquisite food,” Fuyuka said.

“I don’t think I come even remotely close to their ability, to be honest.”

“Well, from where I stand, that puts them on a whole different planet.”

“You kinda have to be when you’re cooking at that level.”

“That makes it all the more important to cherish any advice they give you.”

“Advice?”

“Yes, advice.”

Fuyuka simply parroted what Asahi had said back to him, but it didn’t help to enlighten him at all.

Wait a second... I think I remember her speaking to my mom in the kitchen yesterday. Was she teaching her or something? Nah, wouldn’t make sense. They didn’t talk for long, and to be honest, that dish was stages above Fuyuka’s current level.

As he was absorbed in his thoughts, Fuyuka brought out her phone—seldomly used, but the latest model nevertheless—from her pocket and opened up the messaging app. Asahi recalled that she'd once told him that her contacts list consisted only of relatives and him.

In the end, cooking isn't just about how good it tastes—it's about how much love you put into it.

Fuyuka held out the phone screen for him, which featured a familiar-looking message alongside an even more familiar-looking name. Asahi rubbed his eyes a few times in disbelief, but the name remained the same. Toko Kagami.

"You're telling me you got my mom's number?"

"She told me she'll make time in her busy schedule to teach me the basics of cooking."

"Good for you," Asahi said. *You don't get the chance to be tutored by an elite pro every day. Fuyuka's ability will be elevated to the next level. I'm happy for her.*

Contrary to his sugary thoughts, however, his cheeks twitched and spasmed. He was genuinely afraid that his mother would offer some... *unsolicited comments* about other subjects that didn't necessarily fall under the scope of cooking.

"Speaking of, seems like you had no problems hitting it off with my parents," Asahi noted. Fuyuka tilted her head in puzzlement. "Uh, I mean... You know. You're not exactly the talkative type."

"I'm aware. That's how I received my 'Ice Queen' nickname to begin with."

"You shouldn't speak about yourself like that."

"You don't need to worry. I brought that onto myself."

It feels like we've had this conversation before, but the Fuyuka in front of me is completely different from the coldhearted one from before, Asahi thought.

Although she'd told him that her nickname didn't irritate back then, her permanently-frigid mood, coupled with the icy, no-nonsense glare she wore had done very little for her credibility.

“But you know,” her clear, gorgeous voice tickled his ears. Her expression, gentle as it was, exhibited an unyielding determination indicative of the fundamental change in Fuyuka’s mindset. “I’ve been thinking of changing my ways recently. I know it won’t be easy at first, but if I take small steps... Besides, your parents are very much like you.”

“What do you mean?”

“They were the ones who made an effort to approach me, and they wouldn’t take no for an answer. How could I have possibly turned them down?”

“Oh, so that’s what you meant.”

“You *were* very pushy when we first met too, remember?”

“I was, now that I think back to it,” he agreed. *And I’m only just beginning to realize how much of a hassle it must’ve been for her. Probably more than my parents made her go through. Well, it wasn’t all that bad, in retrospect. It was thanks to my overbearing nature back then that I get to be with Fuyuka right now.*

And if the time they spent together brought along gradual change in her character, then Asahi was happy to be the catalyst, for better or for worse. That gave him all the more incentive to impose himself upon her one more time.

“Say, Fuyuka. Remember that time you met the rowdy duo at my apartment?” he asked.

“I do. What about them?”

“I’m going to visit the shrine with them tomorrow. They’re equally—if not *more*—annoying than my parents, and they love to cause a ruckus. They’re particularly obnoxious and hell-bent on bringing up romance at every opportunity, but they’re great people. I think you’d get along fine with them.”

It took her a second to understand what he was trying to tell her. Fuyuka, who had isolated herself within a glacial wall detached from people, was now considering taking the first steps toward constructing a relationship with others. Asahi wondered if the decision to change her attitude had anything to do with the rumor that was currently circulating about the “Ice Queen’s” icy façade melting away.

There were only two people that sprung to mind who would be a perfect fit for the job.

“So, you wanna come with? Those two *really* want to become friends with you,” he proposed. *Chiaki and Hinami will finally be able to befriend the real Fuyuka Himuro, not “The Ice Queen” front she kept for so long.*

Fuyuka’s head drooped. She paused for a moment to steel her resolve before muttering, “If they’re your friends... then yes, I want to go with you.”

She shot a piercing gaze at Asahi. Although her eyes carried a tinge of distress, they also projected her firm will to move forward.

“Got it. I’ll let them know,” he said. *Man, how will Chiaki and Hinami react when they find out? Never mind, they’re already going crazy just from the messages I’m seeing.*

Now that Fuyuka would actually meet “The Obnoxious Couple,” Asahi felt the need to protect her from their regular antics. They had a bad habit of sticking their noses in where they didn’t belong, for example.

Still, it would also be the start of a new chapter in Asahi and Fuyuka’s relationship, and the mere thought made him smile.

Chapter Three

Shrine Visit

It was the third and final day of New Year's celebrations in accordance with Japanese tradition. Fuyuka spent New Year's day with the Kagami family and agreed on tagging along with Asahi for the hatsumode on the second day—the custom of visiting a shrine for the first time in the new year in order to pray for a prosperous year ahead.

Asahi and Fuyuka were making their way to Soleil Levant, or, more accurately, to the house nearby where Kazuaki and Toko lived.

They'd arranged to meet up with Chiaki and Hinami in the afternoon so they could all go to the shrine together. At least, they *had*, until Asahi had relayed the news to his parents. They'd asked him to bring Fuyuka to their house at once. Needless to say, Asahi was left in a strange position with the knowledge that his own parents wanted something to do with Fuyuka rather than their own son.

"Why would they call us over when they know we're gonna be busy after?" Asahi asked.

"They must have their reasons," Fuyuka replied.

"You know what this is all about, right? Spill the deets."

"I do, but... I'm going to keep it a secret for now."

"You're just making me more curious."

"You'll understand soon enough. Keep looking forward to it."

Unbeknownst to Asahi, everything had been devised and organized between Fuyuka and Toko. His idea of enjoying the New Year's seemed to be widely different compared to his parents'. While he'd imagined days of lounging around and relaxing, his parents clearly had other plans in mind. They'd been constantly pestering their son and his friends since New Year's Day.

They said they'd drive us to the shrine when we're done, so there's no reason

to refuse, Asahi thought to himself as he marched alongside Fuyuka.

It had only been about a week since Christmas Eve. Although they'd both walked the same streets recently, the town appeared utterly changed. Holiday decorations had been hung up here and there, which further cemented the fact that a new year had begun.

Asahi and Fuyuka indulged in idle chatter as they walked down the road, tumultuous crowds bustling around them all the while. They arrived upon an aged house before long.

Asahi felt a wave of anxiety as he approached the door; it had been quite some time since he'd last set foot in his family home, after all. Still, his unease wasn't even remotely comparable to what Fuyuka must have been experiencing. She was about to visit his house after only meeting with his parents on three separate occasions.

She must be sweating bullets right now. Can't say I blame her, I'd feel the same if I was in her shoes, he thought. "Tell me when you're ready so I ring the intercom."

"G-Go right ahead," she stuttered nervously.

Asahi pressed the intercom button. The two of them were soon greeted by a set of boisterous footsteps approaching the entrance, rather than a voice over the speaker.

"Asahi, you made it! And Himuro, you're here too! Welcome!" Kazuaki called out enthusiastically as he flung the door open.

Toko followed right behind him. "Hi. Long time, no see. Get in—it's cold outside."

Asahi's parents showed them into the house, where they took off their shoes at the entrance and proceeded to the guest room together.

Never thought I'd ever be a guest in my own house, Asahi mused as his lips twisted into a strained smile.

Suddenly, his father gripped his shoulder.

"C'mere, Asahi—we'll be going this way," Kazuaki said.

“Fuyuka and I will be staying in this room,” Toko remarked, her hand on the girl’s shoulder. She pointed toward the corridor, gesturing that she wanted them out of the room. Her face was stoic as ever; not even Asahi could tell what she was plotting.

“You heard your mom, Asahi. No guys allowed in this room until they say otherwise.”

“Yeah, yeah, suit yourselves,” Asahi replied. *Fuyuka’s quiet as a lamb. She knows what’s going on, so I guess there’s no need to worry, really*

Asahi and his father complied and moved to the living room. He plopped down on the sofa. Since he needed to kill some time until his mother called him over, what better way to do so than by watching TV?

I bet the broadcast schedule’s jam-packed with specials since it’s the start of a new year. I don’t think I’ll get bored anytime soon.

“Hey, Asahi—you couldn’t possibly have, oh, I dunno... *forgotten* that I’m right here next to you?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then why don’t you *speak* with your old man instead of watching TV?! We’ve got *so much* to catch up on!”

“We literally saw each other two days ago, Dad, *and* we stay in touch. What else could you want?”

“Toko, dear, come over! Asahi’s in his rebellious phase and refuses to listen to me!”

“What the—sheesh, fine. You win. I’m all ears.”

Asahi gave in to the pressure and reluctantly turned off the TV. Even the biting cold of winter wasn’t able to cool off Kazuaki’s overwhelming, fiery personality.

“You’re such a good son, Asahi.”

“You set the bar way too low, Dad. Both what you consider an obedient *and* a difficult child.”

“You can be the *best* son someday... if you end up walking in with your future bride and announcing it to us.”

“Don’t look at me like that. I’ve heard this exact thing a dozen times.”

Kazuaki had always been outspoken about his eager desire to see a grandchild, so he paid considerable attention to Asahi’s female friends. Ironically, his father’s eagerness—or rather, incessant badgering—probably played a large role in Asahi’s indifference toward romantic relationships. At least, that’s what Asahi was inclined to think.

That means today’s the exact scenario he’s been waiting for.

“Himuro is great, isn’t she? She’s well-mannered, elegant, and most importantly, gorgeous.”

“I’ve told you a hundred times—we aren’t in a relationship.”

“Personally, I think you’re perfect for each other.”

“Just don’t bring this up in front of Fuyuka. She doesn’t see me like *that*.”

“Really now...?” his father sounded dispirited.

I get that he’s sad, but I hope he keeps this convo between just the two of us. Hell, if he went to Fuyuka about this, I wouldn’t be surprised if it’d be considered some kind of harassment in today’s society.

“Well, what do *you* think of her, then?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You know what I mean. This is the first time you’ve brought a girl home. You must like her at least a *little* bit, right?”

“I do... as a friend,” Asahi replied cryptically.

“I think I’ve got the full picture now,” Kazuaki nodded with a broad grin. “We gotta make sure you impress the lady.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Sit tight—I’m gonna go get something. I’ll be right back.”

Kasauki headed up toward the second floor—where both his bedroom and

Asahi's former-bedroom-turned-storage were—with brisk footsteps. Given the clamor and thunderous stomps coming from upstairs, he was undoubtedly searching for something. And just when Asahi thought the commotion had finally settled down, a series of loud thumps arose from the stairs.

His father returned, panting, and held out a piece of clothing to his son. He must've dragged it out of his closet.

"Here you go, Asahi. I want you to have it."

"Why do you have a kimono?"

"I've had this thing since I was your age, and now I'm giving it to yo—hey, hold on! What do you think you're doing?! Stop sniffing it! I made sure to clean it up properly beforehand. You're gonna make your old man cry, you know that?!"

"I'm just messing with you, Dad. Wonder if I'll fit in it, though."

"It should be *juuust* fine. Well, it might be a tad big, but that's it."

Kazuaki, who was taller and boasted a stocky physique, had bought the kimono when he was still maturing physically. Unfortunately, he'd hit an intense growth spurt soon after, which meant he'd grown out of it quickly. The kimono had been sitting in the closet ever since, waiting to be worn.

"You're going to the shrine, right? You might as well dress for the occasion!" Kazuaki exclaimed with a wide smile.

"I appreciate it, Dad."

Asahi was rewarded by his father ruffling his hair.

*

Asahi stood in front of the mirror as his father helped him fold the kimono. The dark-blue shade predominated the color scheme, right down to the haori—a type of jacket worn on top of the kimono. The only garment which deviated from that theme was the sash, which provided a distinctive beige accent.

Although Asahi was a fair bit more slender than his father, the kimono managed to maintain its shape on his body quite well. Overall, his outfit was the very picture of refinement.

“Mhmm. I knew it’d suit you well,” Kazuaki said, looking pleased.

“Didn’t expect it to be so easy to move around wearing one of those things.”

“Yeah, it’s great. The real challenge is walking when you’re wearing wooden clogs. Well, I guess you just get used to it, like all things.”

Clothes really do make the man, Asahi thought as he checked himself out in the mirror. *Especially ones like this which are worn only on special occasions. They hit different.*

“Yo, yo! Looking handsome, fresh, and extra *stylish!*” Kazuaki praised his son to an overly-youthful beat for reasons beyond mortal comprehension. The little performance was odd, but it still made Asahi happy.

“Not gonna lie, I think I’m gonna feel a bit embarrassed about going outside in this.”

“It’ll be fine. It’s not like you’ll stand out or anything.”

“Good point.”

It was New Year’s, after all—a large number of people were out in similar traditional attire. Nobody would bat an eyelash at Asahi. Although he didn’t particularly care about how strangers would look at him, someone else’s opinion weighed on his mind. He worried about what a *certain special someone* thought of his attire...

“Asahi? Kazuaki? You can come in now,” Toko’s voice beckoned from the guest room.

“You heard her, Asahi. Let’s go show them how great you look,” Kazuaki urged, pushing his son from behind.

Asahi stood outside the room, his hands tentatively on the sliding screen’s handle.

Fuyuka is right there. I wonder what she’ll think of my kimono... I suppose being conscious of it means I see her as more than just a “friend.” He gathered his resolve and pushed the screen to the side. “We’re coming in.”

The scenery which unfolded from behind the screen left him planted in place. His muscles twitched and contracted, as if a current of electricity had passed

through his body.

Asahi was left unnerved, his brain incapable of forming a single coherent thought. Suddenly, he recalled an identical situation in the past: Christmas Eve, when Fuyuka had donned that beautiful dress. He'd grown accustomed to seeing her on a regular basis, but she'd completely pulled the rug from underneath him. His tongue slipped back then, and he hadn't been able to stop himself from blurting out the word, "Beautiful."

What Asahi was currently experiencing was something of a similar fashion. Fuyuka acted no less astonished herself, her eyes widening in pure shock.

It took them some time to finally speak. When they did, their conversation was... awkward, if one were to phrase it generously.

"Where did you get that dress?" he asked.

"Your mother was kind enough to let me wear it. What about you?"

"My dad gave it to me, actually. I think you look great in it."

"I'm happy to hear you say that," Fuyuka said, a smile dimpling her cheeks. Her grin was just as—no, more—lovely than ever, courtesy of the magnificent kimono she was wearing.

Asahi took another glance at the fair maiden in front of him. He found himself unable to take his eyes off her.

The kimono she wore was of the furisode variety, distinguished by its longer sleeves. The outer fabric was a light-peach color and embellished in long, dainty ribbon motifs that accentuated her graceful curves. This pattern was known as tabane-noshi, a popular design motif that was associated with good omens. It was believed that the number of ribbons corresponded to the amount of blessings one would receive from people. It also denoted the strong bond or relationship between individuals, whereas their length represented longevity.

This was all, of course, niche trivia that Asahi had no access to.

The kimono, and what it stood for, matched Fuyuka's disposition immaculately. It was the ideal fit. Whether it was by a mere fortunate coincidence or some greater poetic intervention at play was anyone's guess.

What was more tangible, however, was Fuyuka's impeccable beauty, which drew out the furisode's full splendor.

My mom must've helped Fuyuka put on some makeup after she dressed her.

That being said, her makeup was by no means intrusive. It served to accentuate certain parts of her face, resulting in a mature impression while maintaining her innocent features. The faint trace of pink eyeliner, blush, and lipstick all seamlessly blended into the furisode's intricate patterns. All in all, her ensemble collaborated to create a balanced, attractive look.

To top it off, Fuyuka's hair—which usually ran down to her waist—had been gathered together in a bun and fastened with a red, flower-shaped hairpin. One delicate strand had been left loose. Her new hairstyle permitted glimpses of the white nape of her neck. A sweet fragrance wafted from her hair.

Fuyuka stepped closer to Asahi and whispered into his ear, "I think you look amazing in your kimono, too."

Asahi's heart skipped a beat. Although he felt his entire body burning up, he quickly brushed it off, attributing it to not being used to wearing stuffy clothes like the kimono. Fuyuka was much the same—her ears were tinged in pink.

Time marched on, and silence still persisted. They were both visibly embarrassed, to the point that they avoided any eye contact with each other.

"Reminds me of the good ol' glory days," Kazuaki noted.

"Mhm," Toko replied.

What went through the minds of the married pair as they watched the innocent, youthful couple from afar? Did they feel the pang of loneliness now that their child had grown up? Or did they feel a rush of happiness as they witnessed the bud of a possible future family blooming? Or did they even, perhaps, see themselves in Asahi and Fuyuka?

"Look here, you two," Toko chimed in, causing them to turn and face her. "Since you're already dressed up, why not take a picture while we're at it?"

"Great idea, dear! I have a camera and everything, lemme go get it!" Kazuaki declared, bolting out of the room. He came back in a flash. The clear lens

pointed at Asahi and Fuyuka belonged to a SLR camera that Asahi was all too familiar with.

“Asahi, relax your face a bit,” Toko nagged.

“You know how bad I am with having my picture taken.”

“C’mon Himuro, show me that million-dollar smile!” Kazuaki exclaimed.

“I-I’m trying to!”

His parents watched tenderly at the kids’ clumsy smiles.

“Move to the left, Asahi!”

“Like this?”

“And you, Himuro—a bit to the right, please?”

“Is this all right?”

“Yes, yes, this is wonderful! Keep going!”

“B-But we’ll bump into each other if we continue like this...” Fuyuka protested.

“That’s exactly the point! Let’s cut out the middle man and have you two lovebirds standing shoulder-to-shoulder—ouch, ouch, ouch! You’re hurting me, dear!”

“That’s enough fun. Take the picture already,” Toko commanded.

“Right away, ma’am!”

Asahi and Fuyuka exchanged glances and burst out into laughter.

“Whoa, now *this* the money shot!”

Kchak! The camera shutter went off, preserving the first page of a delightful story to come. Much like the upcoming spring season, the picture displayed a pleasant, warm ambience.

*

The shrine was already swarming with massive crowds by the time Kazuaki drove Asahi and Fuyuka there. There were people as far as the eye could see, and one would need to take care to avoid bumping into others when traversing

around.

“Here you go, kids. Pray on our behalf too, will you?” Kazuaki asked before driving off to join his wife back at the house. Asahi’s parents had to begin preparations for the restaurant’s reopening tomorrow, and thus couldn’t make it to the shrine with them.

Asahi and Fuyuka sought warmth in the pocket heaters Kazuaki had given them as they headed to the meeting spot they’d agreed upon with his good friends earlier.

“They say they’re gonna be here any second,” Asahi told her.

“I see.”

Fuyuka was clearly stressed—her good mood from just moments ago had evaporated. Although it bothered Asahi to see Fuyuka so tense, especially when she looked so beautiful, it was to be expected. Chiaki and Hinami were strangers to her, and she wasn’t exactly a social butterfly to begin with. Whilst it was her own decision to keep people at arm’s length, she’d vowed to change. That was why she’d accepted Asahi’s invitation to be here today.

To be fair, it all happened pretty quickly. She probably didn’t have enough time to mentally prepare herself yet.

Asahi took the opportunity to poke her cheeks, causing her to flinch with a start.

“Eep! Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!” she cried.

“I don’t know. I was bored.”

“I don’t appreciate you startling me over such a petty reason,” she grumbled. Then she flashed a faint smile and said, “Thank you for worrying about me.”

“Got no clue what you’re talking about,” he retorted. He felt rather flustered that his attempt at cheering her up had been so transparent and opted to change the topic. “If Hinami comes after you, make a run for it and don’t look back.”

“C-Come after me? Is she violent, or something?”

“Nah, she wouldn’t use *actual* violence.”

“You’re making less sense by the second, I’m afraid.”

Asahi and Fuyuka chatted while they waited for “The Obnoxious Couple.”

Asahi found himself surprisingly talkative as he blabbered about stories from his absurdly turbulent—yet exciting—daily life. He cracked a smile occasionally when he recounted particular situations, and Fuyuka listened attentively. She often grinned back and responded.

In the meantime, dozens, if not hundreds, of people passed by... until a pair of footsteps halted in front of them.

“Isn’t that Asahi and... Himuro, maybe?” a voice timidly probed.

Asahi and Fuyuka turned and caught sight of a cheerful expression.

“I knew it! It *is* Asahi! He’s got Himuro with him too!”

“Sup, peeps? You two look good.” Chiaki, who was right behind Hinami, greeted them with a big smirk on his face.

“Thanks, man. Wait, you two are out here in normal clothes?” Asahi asked.

“Yeah, dude. You didn’t mention this to me, sooo...”

“My bad. I didn’t mean to make it seem like we’re more into the whole thing than you are.”

“Nah, it’s all good. Besides, my girl loves it,” Chiaki said, pointing at Hinami.

The cheerful girl’s eyes practically sparkled. The same couldn’t be said about Fuyuka who found Hinami’s advances... uncomfortable.

“Your furisode is, like, super cute! You look amazing!”

“Thank you so much.”

“Oh, yeah—this is our first time *actually* talking, huh? I’m Hinami Aiba! Nice to meetcha!”

“I-I’m Fuyuka Himuro. I remember you from the sports festival.”

“You do?! I’m legit honored!”

“Ah... umm, you’re standing too close,” Fuyuka mumbled. Although she was clearly overwhelmed by Hinami’s enthusiasm, she’d been able to maintain a

conversation for the time being.

“Ah, Asahi you’re looking nice too by the way,” Hinami added.

“Definitely not making it sound like I’m an afterthought... but, yeah. Thanks, Hinami.”

“Hey, Himuro. I’m Chiaki Kikkawa, nice to finally meet ya.”

“L-Likewise.”

Now that brief introductions were over with, the four of them began walking. Each person walked at a different pace, but they’d decided on the destination beforehand.

“Oh right. I forgot to ask, but did you guys, like, buy those kimonos, or is it a rental sort of thing?” Hinami asked.

“Asahi’s parents were kind enough to let us use them, actually,” Fuyuka replied.

“Wha—your relationship’s reached the point where parents are involved too?!”

“Yo, Asahi—I’m gonna need you to fill your old buddy Chiaki in on the juicy details.”

“Fine... Let’s split up,” Asahi said after a hesitant pause.

*

“Look there, Fuyu-Fuyu—there’s some kinda campfire thingy over there!”

“That’s called a ‘ritual bonfire,’” Fuyuka explained. The bonfire—or otakiage—was a Shinto ritual where monks threw last year’s lucky charms into a sacred fire.

“Ohmigod, are you seeing what I’m seeing?! There’s a lion-dog statue over there in all its glory! Let’s go check it out!”

“P-Please wait! It’s dangerous to run around on shrine grounds!”

Hinami radiated such an extraordinary vigor that one might seriously question if the term “setting boundaries” even existed in her vocabulary.

“They haven’t even been acquainted for an hour yet and look at them go,” Asahi remarked.

“Dude, it hasn’t even been 30 minutes.”

“Are all girls like that?”

“Nah, Hina is a special case. This is something only your friendly neighborhood *Hinalayan* Yeti can do.”

“Friendly... *what* now? I’ve never heard of a sociable monster before.”

“I’m telling you, my girl’s like the strongest beast. She can make friends with *anybody*. Seriously.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I’ll take your word for it.”

Asahi and Chiaki observed Hinami darting straight toward the lion-dog statue while Fuyuka ambled behind her at a moderate pace. Once Hinami remembered it was hard for Fuyuka to run in a furisode, she rushed back to her new friend’s side once again.



Fuyuka was baffled by the sheer amount of energy which Hinami possessed—and rightfully so—but she wasn't vexed by it anymore. It even so happened that she seemed far more relaxed than earlier.

Who would've thought the Hinalayan Yeti's powers were the real deal? She even went from calling her "Himuro" to "Fuyu-Fuyu" in a matter of minutes. That's such a great way to get closer to someone.

"Didn't Hinami give you a nickname too, or am I remembering things wrong?" Chiaki asked.

"She did—approximately 10 seconds after you'd introduced us."

"Damn, that probably holds the fastest record to date. Anyway, why'd she go back to calling you your first name?"

"Because I rejected every single one of them."

"Ah, I got it. She called you *Asahinator*—"

"Please no. She'll go back to using it if she hears..."

"What's wrong, bud?" Chiaki asked, curious about why Asahi had suddenly trailed off and stopped walking.

"Weren't they both heading for the lion-dog statue just now?"

"You bet they were. They were looking all buddy-buddy and... Huh?"

Chiaki finally understood what Asahi had insinuated with his question. They both looked over at the vast crowd that had gathered around the lovely statue. The only problem was that neither Fuyuka nor Hinami were anywhere to be found; pushing through the throngs of people to search for them yielded the same result.

Hinami must've gotten pretty excited since she doesn't come to the shrine often, and the addition of a surprise new guest probably added fuel to the hyperactive fire. I can easily see her taking Fuyuka's hand and running off somewhere without a second thought.

"So you're telling me..."

"Yup, we've just lost them in the crowd," Asahi confirmed.

He and his friend stared at each other now they had fully grasped the situation. One heaved a large sigh, while the other snickered happily to himself.

*

“Found them yet?” Asahi asked.

“Nope, no such luck.”

It had been a little over 10 minutes since Fuyuka and Hinami had disappeared when the guys hadn’t been paying attention.

While reason dictated that they couldn’t have possibly gone far, they were still nowhere to be seen. Asahi attempted to make use of modern technology and pulled out his phone to call them, but to no avail; the signal was simply too weak. They wouldn’t pick up no matter the times he tried.

I could always see if the people at the help desk can help us find them, but... I’m not sure Fuyuka or Hinami would appreciate being treated like lost children, Asahi thought. “Damn, you should just hold Hinami’s hand next time.”

“Dude, d’you think anything on this earth can keep my Hina in one place when she’s excited like that? Hell no.”

“Whatever. Let’s keep looking.”

“What’s the big rush, anyways? We’ll join up with them in front of the worship hall.”

“Oh yeah? Could I get a quick source check for that claim?”

“Hina and I are telepathic. Trust me.”

Yup, so telepathic that you definitely didn’t lose sight of her. Guess there isn’t much point in crying over spilled milk, though.

Wacky quirks aside, Chiaki’s argument was sensible. They were all visiting the shrine as part of the New Year’s celebrations, so there was a high possibility they’d rendezvous by the worship hall.

Not sure if Hinami’ll follow that line of thought, though. All I can do is trust Fuyuka here.

“How about we chill and have a little chitchat while we’re here?” Chiaki

abruptly suggested. His mouth curled into a smirk, as if he'd been waiting for this chance all day long.

"Chitchat about what?"

"What else but Himuro?! Duh! Everyone's sleeping on you, but not me—I could just *smell* it in the air."

"What're you talking about? I can't smell anything. Guess I'm coming down with a cold—I mean, it *is* winter."

"Ha ha. Nice one, wise guy. Playing dumb with your buddy, huh? Real impressive."

"I'm being serious over here. Stop it with the weird similes, Shakespeare."

"*Fiiine*. Remember when you told me you and Himuro were just, ahem, and I quote: '*friiends*'?"

Why'd he pronounce it like it's a big reveal in some dating game show or something? I don't recall saying it like that. Still, he's not wrong. Explaining the whole deal to him multiple times through text was worth every second.

Asahi had informed Chiaki about how the relationship had all kicked off. It had started when he'd nursed Fuyuka after she'd fallen ill. Later, it had just so happened that their interests aligned. Asahi taught her how to cook; in exchange, Fuyuka helped him with his studies. Although they'd begun by essentially scratching each other's backs, it turned out that they get along well with one another.

Obviously I omitted some of the finer details here and there, but I didn't lie, Asahi thought to himself. I'd already done the same thing with my parents by the time Chiaki got to hear of it, so I knew what I was gonna say.

Nevertheless, Chiaki Kikkawa was anything but credulous; he had a knack of picking up on the most subtle of cues around him. He was so perceptive at times, in fact, that Asahi felt he could never let his guard down around him.

Chiaki wasn't all that fazed when I told him Fuyuka was coming. It almost felt like he was expecting it.

"I'm just gonna ask, Asahi—what do you think of Himuro?"

“Don’t ask me questions I can’t follow.”

“Like...do you fancy her? Maybe there’s something going on between you guys, and—dude! Mind the psycho eyes!” he cried.

Chiaki’s question hadn’t even merited a reply, so Asahi glared at his friend in silence until he’d dialed it down a bit.

Why does everything always have to be about the two of us being in a relationship? My parents did it, and now my friends are doing it, too, he complained to himself. “Like I’ve said a hundred times: Fuyuka and I are friends. Nothing more.”

“I get that, I really do. But like, bearing in mind that she’s just a friend, how do you feel about her? Do you like her? Hate her?”

“Obviously I don’t hate her.”

“Hmm, I see,” Chiaki replied in a provocative tone.

Asahi began to stride hastily across the shrine grounds in an attempt to leave his friend behind.

If you present me with the two options, then yes—I like Fuyuka, and she’ll always fall under that category. You can even give me a third “neutral” option, and I’d still stick to my choice, no hesitation.

Still, the affection he harbored for Fuyuka was purely platonic... or so he thought. The delightful sensation which surfaced when Fuyuka’s innocent expression leaped to mind for a mere moment begged to differ.

“But, yeah—I guess you *were* the one who melted ‘The Ice Queen’s’ heart, huh?”

“And what’re you basing this on?”

“It’s obvious, man. No matter which way you twist it, Himuro has changed, and it’s all because of you. It’s obvious just looking at you two,” Chiaki said with a chuckle.

Asahi, for the life of him, couldn’t think of a single instance where he’d done anything *special* for Fuyuka.

There's only one thing I can say for sure—I stuck my nose in Fuyuka's business. That's about it, he thought. “I don't think I've done anything, honestly.”

“Yeah, maybe that's what *you* see, but she might think otherwise. You catch my drift?”

Sure enough, before long, Fuyuka had begun to smile more often. She'd even taken a huge first step toward changing the way she interacted with other people.

Actually... Didn't something similar to this happen during Christmas? Fuyuka gave me a mechanical pencil? I haven't really given her anything, but I still got a present anyway, he recollected as he walked down the long, stone-paved path. *What does Chiaki mean? And what was Fuyuka referring to when she said I gave her more than I could imagine? I don't get it.*

“Why'd you even pick a day like this to have us meet her? You *knew* you were signing up for a headache, right?” Chiaki asked, interrupting Asahi's thoughts.

“Glad we're both on the same page there.”

“You're not doing much to hide it. It's written all over your face.”

Then why don't you settle down and zip it?! That was what Asahi *wanted* to say, but he knew it would've been a waste of breath.

Besides, Chiaki had made a good point—Asahi could've easily sidestepped all the hassle by sticking to the story that he and Fuyuka were just neighbors. Instead, he'd gone and created trouble for himself.

They've sure lived up to the whole “obnoxious” part of “The Obnoxious couple.” They've been rowdy and annoying to deal with. Plus, they won't shut up about love or whatever. Regardless, Asahi still thought that they were great people, which was why he'd never cut them off. “Hey, man... I just thought that if anyone was going to become friends with Fuyuka, it'd most likely be you guys.”

“If you say so. You're probably not wrong, anyways,” Chiaki noted with a grin, pointing at the large torii—the iconic red gates found at shrines—ahead.

“Guuuys, over here! You sure took your sweet time!” Hinami shouted,

casually waving at the boys.

Fuyuka was next to her, wearing a forced smile.

“They lost us in the crowd. They were looking for us, Aoba,” Fuyuka said.

“Wait, for real?! You should’ve told me! Now I look like a total airhead!”

“I couldn’t bring myself to do it when I saw you were having so much fun...”

“Fuyu-Fuyu, I wuv you!”

“Wh-Why are you clinging to me out of the blue?!”

“Because you’re such a sweet cutie-pie!”

Fuyuka and Hinami had evidently gotten considerably closer in the short period the guys hadn’t been there with them. Or perhaps it’d be more accurate to say that Hinami was aggressively friendly, whereas Fuyuka—bewildered as she was—simply accepted it.

Warms my soul to see those two hit it off, Asahi thought. “We can say that they’re basically friends at this point, right?”

“Yup,” Chiaki agreed.

Hinami’s approach was a straightforward one; she established a friendship with Fuyuka without following a tortuous detour to get there like Asahi had. Her method was valid, and Asahi was convinced it would melt the ice around Fuyuka’s frosty heart. And, as if to substantiate the claim, a distinct change was apparent on her trademark apathetic face when she was joking around with Hinami.

“Man, I’ve never seen Himuro doing *that* before,” Chiaki commented.

A quiet, gentle smile radiated from under layers of ice. Fuyuka’s grin was so lovely, so angelic, that it mesmerized not only Asahi and Chiaki, but any oncoming passersbys.

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By the time they’d finished performing prayers after their wait in a seemingly-endless queue, Fuyuka had finally grown accustomed to Hinami’s zeal. Her tolerance for any physical contact was still nonexistent, but the anxious

disposition she had displayed earlier had subsided noticeably.

Meanwhile, Chiaki chose to retain a moderate distance from Fuyuka. Still, he was managing to steadily build a connection with her. He chose an easy topic of conversation—Asahi, the friend they had in common.

Probably just a tactic to break the ice. It's always awkward meeting new people, Asahi noted. He kept a watchful eye on “The Obnoxious Couple,” to ensure Hinami didn’t suddenly jump onto Fuyuka, or that Chiaki wouldn’t make any unsolicited remarks. *I don't trust that smirk on his face. It feels like he's controlling the flow of the conversation.*

“All right guys, hear me out—what’s the first activity that comes to mind when you’re at a shrine for New Year’s?” Chiaki inquired.

“It’s *gotta* be checking our fortunes!” Hinami exclaimed.

With that unexpected proposal put forward, the four of them went to draw omikuji—strips of paper found at shrines which held random fortunes written on them.

Their results turned out to be widely different.

“I pulled ‘terrible luck!’ I swear to god, this has never happened to me,” Chiaki lamented dramatically.

“Yaaaah... wow. There’s nothing but horrible things written on this one. You know what you do, right? There’s a place over there you tie it over to,” Asahi said.

“He’s right! Whoa, look at how many people are gathering over there!” Hinami noted with a pointed finger.

“Lemme go get this over with.”

“Chii-pie, wait for me! I’m coming!”

Hinami—who had pulled a respectable “middle blessing”—soon caught up to her trudging boyfriend. She pushed on his back, causing him to stumble on the stairs. He was the type who normally bore some ill-omen to an extent, but perhaps the “terrible luck” slip he’d pulled was a little *too* effective.

Chiaki was well within his right to be terrified. Thinking he was about to die,

he curled himself up tightly. Hinami squealed with laughter.

“They get along quite well,” Fuyuka noted.

“Makes sense. They’re a couple,” Asahi responded.

“Th-They are?!”

“Why are you surprised? They couldn’t make it more obvious if they tried.”

“I-I suppose they were a little *too* intimate... I just never expected that they were in a relationship.”

While Asahi thought she was a bit late to the party, Fuyuka hadn’t met the two of them before. Additionally, she had been dragged around by Hinami all day, so this was the first time she’d experienced “The Obnoxious Couple” flirting.

“Chii-pie, look! Look at what it says for my love fortune!”

“Let’s see here... damn! ‘You’ll find happiness with your current partner,’” Chiaki read aloud. “Couldn’t have put it better myself!”

“This means we’re a god-tier couple!” she cried.

“They’re perfect for each other,” Fuyuka whispered, watching them savor their own little slice of heaven as they tied the paper around a wire.

“What am I gonna do with mine? I think I also need to go tie it up,” Asahi said.

“The fortune you drew said ‘good luck’ on it. I don’t really see a need to do so.”

“Isn’t that fortune sorta iffy? Like, it’s the least amount of good fortune you could pull.”

“Not necessarily. There are many interpretations regarding the fortunes’ order. There’s even a sequence where it considers ‘good luck’ to be one away from ‘excellent luck.’”

Fuyuka, being the top of her class, naturally possessed an extensive repertoire of knowledge. She proceeded to offer an exhaustive explanation on the matter. According to her, the Association of Shinto Shrines—the administrative organization which oversaw the shrines—hadn’t been wholly precise on which

fortune ranks where. It was, supposedly, because they placed more of an importance on using fortunes to serve as principles to live by, rather than solely focusing on the type drawn. She also assured Asahi that any doubts regarding the rank of his fortune could be readily diffused by asking the chief priest. In fact, the same could be said for any shrine.

“Maybe I’ll hold on to it, then,” Asahi said, pocketing the slip. *Still not 100 percent sure on where it stands on the list, but hey. If Fuyuka says it’s good, then it probably is.*

“Yes, please do.”

“Fuyu-Fuyu!” Hinami yelled.

“Y-Yes?”

“Can you show me the ‘excellent luck’ slip you drew real quick?”

“Sure, I don’t mind...” Fuyuka replied, puzzled.

Hinami paid no heed to her new friend’s bewilderment as she examined the slip of paper with sparkling eyes.

“How’s it look, Hina?” Chiaki asked.

“It predicts her future’ll be filled with happiness!”

“Whoa, that’s great to hear. That’s definitely something to look forward to.”

“Safe to say that expectations are at an all-time high!” Hinami said.

The “Obnoxious Couple” had come back swinging. The pair wore identical smirks, glancing at both Fuyuka and Asahi.

“You have any clue why they’re grinning like that?” Asahi asked.

“I-I don’t think I understand it either,” Fuyuka stated, her cheeks slightly flushed. “Aoba, can I have my fortune back, please?”

“Whaaa? But I haven’t even read, like, half of it yet!” Hinami protested.

Unfortunately for the other girl, Fuyuka was discernibly flustered. She retrieved the paper slip somewhat forcibly.

Huh, did something happen to tick her off or something?

Chiaki and Hinami stared at the two of them—Asahi with his perplexed expression and Fuyuka with her beet-red face—and their grins widened even further.

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The crowd congestion had reached its peak by the time the group had exhausted all of their options and were considering heading home. They were certain they'd done everything there was to do, from enjoying sweet sake to writing their wishes on small wooden plaques—called ema—and hanging them.

They figured it would inconvenience the visitors if they continued to wander around in a four-person group, and so they split into two pairs. Chiaki and Hinami took the front, while Asahi and Fuyuka followed behind them.

“They hold hands so casually,” Fuyuka noted, observing that Chiaki and Hinami held hands without needing to exchange a look or articulate a single word.

“Sometimes they’ll even full-on embrace each other if you take your eye off them,” Asahi replied.

“How bold...”

Fuyuka gazed pointedly at the pair of entwined hands. Chiaki and Hinami seemed to have sensed an intense glare, or perhaps they'd just overheard the conversation. Either way, they swiftly swiveled their heads back. Their expressions seemed ominous to Asahi. Based on his experience with “The Obnoxious Couple,” they were definitely up to something.

“Why don’t you guys hold hands too?” Hinami asked.

“Huh?” Asahi mumbled after a pause. Her proposition had made him come to a grinding halt, and his mind went blank.

“What?” Fuyuka gasped.

Asahi resumed walking again somehow. They couldn’t simply stop in place—there were large amounts of visitors around.

“And why would we do that?” Asahi pressed, still unable to compose himself.

“Easy—so you don’t get separated from each other again,” Chiaki said.

“Yeah! It’d be reassuring, don’t you think?” Hinami added.

“Nice one, Hinami. But maybe that wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t run around like a chicken with its head cut off,” Asahi retorted.

“W-Well yeah, but... You never know what could happen!”

This whole argument is pretty stupid, but it’s almost convincing coming from someone who just got lost.

Indeed, the crowd passing by was a virtual torrent. One could certainly get stranded if they allowed their minds to wander even for a second.

I see their point, but holding hands? Might be the norm for couples, but not for friends—especially if they’re the opposite sex. Wait, why am I even seriously considering this?

Asahi had been incredibly close to being swayed, but an instance of clarity provided him with a rather basic answer. He and Fuyuka paid attention to their surroundings, unlike Hinami. If they remained careful at all times, then there wouldn’t be a need for them to hold hands.

He was confident Fuyuka—who’d had her head lowered in silence for some time now—had reached the same conclusion.

Suddenly, he noticed Fuyuka’s left hand creeping hesitantly closer to him.

“You all right, Fuyuka?” Asahi asked.

Her small, delicate hand inched forward one centimeter at a time. The “Obnoxious Couple” and Asahi monitored it with bated breath. Her slender fingers edged yet another centimeter closer, then...

“I feel... safer this way,” she mumbled, timidly pinching Asahi’s kimono sleeve between her index finger and thumb.

“Heh.” “Oooh!” the peanut gallery replied cryptically.

Unfortunately for them, Asahi didn’t have the spare resources to even notice. “Hold on tight,” he said.

“I will.”

Asahi and Fuyuka brought their shoulders together, connected by a rather

loose binding. Although they weren't touching each other directly, Asahi could still sense a warmth emanating from her hand.

They were interrupted by a pair of energetic, cheery children comparing their fortunes.

"You hear that? The 'excellent luck' fortune is followed by 'good luck' in this shrine!"

"That means our fortunes sit right next to each other!"

"Good for you, Asahi," Fuyuka said.

"Mm, yeah."

The sound of two sets of footsteps overlapped atop the extended, stone-paved path. Asahi and Fuyuka chatted with each other, the two of them smiling softly the entire time.

They kept a short proximity between them, and—despite the intolerable vexation it stirred in Asahi's bosom—it wasn't an entirely unpleasant sensation. It was a lighthearted, ticklish feeling, feathery in nature.

Chapter Four

What Lies Beneath the Frost

The two-week long winter vacation had passed by in a blink of an eye; today was the final day of holidays. The opening ceremony for the third academic semester awaited the students tomorrow.

Time seemed to flow rapidly from Asahi's perspective, and the upcoming ceremony only served to cement this sentiment.

Generally, his previous winter vacations had consisted of him adopting an easy going lifestyle and loafing around at his house. This year had been more hectic than usual in comparison—perhaps *too* hectic. There had been several events in the week spanning between Christmas and New Year's.

Still had a great time regardless, Asahi thought as he recollected the cherished memories he'd made. He couldn't help but note that Fuyuka had been present in each one without fail. "You really ended up coming here everyday."

"Yes. Thanks to that, I don't feel bad about my cooking skills anymore," Fuyuka said.

"Good. You shouldn't," he replied after a pause.

"Why did you hesitate when you said that?"

"No reason. I genuinely think you've gotten better at it."

"Hmm... I thought you were about to tease me again."

"Damn, I don't remember being so ruthless that it made you skeptical."

Fuyuka had shown some incredible improvement in her skills recently. She'd even reached a level where she could comfortably cook for herself. Although more elaborate dishes still posed a challenge, she didn't break a sweat preparing single dishes or simple snacks. She had been fastidious, practicing whenever she had her free time at her apartment. Asahi could only assume that his mother had been supporting her behind the scenes, though he hadn't

verified.

Toko wasn't the only new addition to Fuyuka's contact list—the “Obnoxious Couple” had taken up two additional spots. From what Asahi could collect, she messaged them regularly. In fact, he'd often see Fuyuka tinkering with her phone after they'd eaten a meal together.

Normally, she wore a smile and enjoyed the interactions. Today, however, was different. Fuyuka—who occupied her now-regular spot at the edge of the sofa—typed and swiped away with awkward movements.

“Aoba tells me she's only finished half of her homework,” Fuyuka said.

“Still has her work cut out for her. Chiaki told me he'd be pulling an all nighter to finish it.”

“Is there a chance we could show them our answers?”

“Nooope.”

“I figured you'd say that.”

Chiaki and Hinami must be scrambling to get done right about now, Asahi mused. They were the type of students who put off their homework up until the last possible second. I know Fuyuka wants to help those two procrastinating idiots, but they don't deserve any sympathy. They brought it on themselves. It's a shame, too—they're both smart, but they never study. We shouldn't cave in. It's for their sake, too.

Contrary to the “Obnoxious Couple,” Asahi and Fuyuka were the kind of students who stuck to their strictly-planned study schedule. In the end, they were rewarded with ample time for relaxation. Fuyuka had suggested they work on their homework together. As a result, they'd completed it all before the shrine trip.

They'd just finished enjoying a meal and washing the dishes. The two of them were free to laze about as they pleased.

“Oh yeah, I noticed you still call Chiaki and Hinami by their last names.”

“I'm not comfortable enough to use their first names yet.”

“Why not? They'll still be your friends even after the fact,” Asahi assured her.

Fuyuka responded with a faint nod. There was once a time when she regarded calling people by their first names as proof of their friendship. Nowadays, however, she focused on creating relationships without necessitating any proof whatsoever.

That's a pretty huge step for her, honestly.

"I'm going to try my best to socialize with people this semester," Fuyuka declared, her eyes sparkling fiercely with determination. Glints of anxiety and nervousness flickered across them occasionally, but they were far outweighed by her expectations and hope for the future.

Maybe meeting the rowdy bunch was a push in the right direction.

If Fuyuka was given enough time to adapt and use her own methods to work toward getting closer to people, the girl once known as "The Ice Queen" would surely break out of her frosty shell and find popularity amongst her colleagues.

It would mean that a large number of students would finally get to know Fuyuka for her real personality—something only Asahi had access to until now. This would, in turn, propel her to connect with others on a deeper level.

This was exactly what Asahi had wished for from the beginning... And yet, for reasons he couldn't quite comprehend, the mere thought of her surrounded by so many of her classmates stirred a slight unease within his heart.

Why do I feel sorta bothered by it? Asahi questioned himself. "So are you gonna revert back to calling me with my surname again?"

"Wha—?"

"I'm fine if you wanna keep using my first name, just that it'll stand out if you keep it up..."

"I-I'd like to keep things between us the way they are!" she protested loudly.

Guess she's a bit embarrassed to go back to being so formal after so much time, he concluded. "All right, we'll do as you say."

Fuyuka elected to maintain the status quo moving forward. And while Asahi had no means to know exactly how many people Fuyuka would befriend when the new semester kicked off, he could relish this moment of time—no matter

how brief it might've been—where he was the sole person Fuyuka referred to by name.

“I’m going to give it my hardest, Asahi. I promise,” Fuyuka said with a grin.

“Mhmm. Just know that I support you.”

His cliché reply was muttered in the same wonted indifference his mother used. Despite his feigned calm disposition, Asahi was shaken on the inside. He’d grown accustomed to being called by his name. Nonetheless, it still dispensed a unique tumult of emotion in his bosom; one that was much different to when she’d first addressed him as “Asahi.”

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“Huh, she left her phone behind. That’s unusual,” Asahi noted to himself.

He’d just shown Fuyuka to the door before noticing her phone on the table in the living room. He figured that pulling out her phone was such a rare action for her that she’d simply forgotten to take it home with her.

She was surprisingly careless underneath the mature attitude she struck—yet another new aspect about her personality that he’d just discovered.

Oh well, this is a pretty expensive model, so it’d be best to get it back to her ASAP.

Asahi sighed and extended his hand to grab the phone. The motion woke it up and caused it to display the wallpaper: a photo of Fuyuka from her childhood days.

“Is that...?” he mumbled as he inspected the screen.

The girl in the photo was relatively shorter and more youthful compared to the current counterpart. Her expression was practically illuminated with joy. She bore such a dazzling grin that it seemed inconceivable that this was the Fuyuka he knew now, “Ice Queen” or otherwise.

There were two other people standing with her in the photo.

It was easy to infer that the woman—with her lovely long, black hair and sculpturesque, refined features—was her mother. Her soft smile was the picture-perfect definition of a cool, mature beauty.

Wonder if that's how Fuyuka's gonna look like in a few years.

The other figure was a tall, thin man in a suit. Even at first glance, Asahi could tell he was the uptight type. The man's face was utterly expressionless; not even the faintest trace of a smile could be seen on his visage. Asahi felt slightly intimidated.

It wasn't particularly hard to gather that it was a photo of the Himuro family together. Yet something stood out to Asahi—the man pictured felt somehow... off. And as if to solidify this feeling, Asahi noted that the man didn't resemble Fuyuka in the slightest. It was as if he was an outright stranger.

The intercom buzzed for the second time that day, interrupting Asahi's thoughts. He had an idea about who this unexpected guest might be. Sure enough, Fuyuka stood outside, visibly flustered.

"Looking for this, right?" he teased.

"Yes, thank you. I'd completely forgotten it," she said.

"You're fine since it was at my place, but you'd better be more careful when you take it out elsewhere. Okay?" he scolded.

"I will. Well then, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Mhmm, catch you later."

He sent her off and closed the door behind him. Fuyuka, whose hair fluttered in the playful breeze of the evening wind, seemed uncannily similar to the woman he'd seen on her phone's wallpaper. The smile she'd just given him before she'd returned to her apartment, however, matched her childish, innocent expression from back then.

Nevertheless, Asahi couldn't fathom the identity of the tall man in the photo or his relation to Fuyuka. The only thing for certain was that a melancholic shade of anxiety clouded her face whenever she brought up her family. Asahi was—unbeknownst to himself—edging closer to discovering the confined intricacies of Fuyuka's past and what had driven her to becoming "The Ice Queen" in the first place.

Chapter Five

A New Semester

A week had passed since the new semester began, and the gloom which came with returning to school increased with each passing day.

Asahi hadn't been able to bring himself to rise from bed for classes, let alone the opening ceremony, but he'd managed to grow accustomed to the school routine once again.

Clouds continued their presidency over the sky, sharpening the icy sting of the winter cold. Subsequently, more students had been showing up to school clad in coats, cardigans, and the like. Heaters had been employed in classrooms, and exhales started to take perceivable shape in the form of white vapor.

And despite all those factors, there were—surprisingly enough—other elements which also signified the official arrival of winter for Asahi.

“Chii-pie, why's the ramen you got all red like that?” Hinami asked.

“Doesn't it look great? It's a pipin' hot kimchi ramen! Only available during the winter season!”

“Gonna have to pass on that one,” Asahi said.

“I agree with Asahi. It looks too intense for me,” Fuyuka chimed in.

“Typical Chii-pie—can't live without his spice.”

“C'mon guys, am I the only one hyped up about this?!” Chiaki cried, his shoulders drooping in disappointment from lack of support.

His over-the-top reaction gained laughter from Asahi, Hinami, and even a soft, elegant titter from Fuyuka.

In an ideal world, the four of them could've been described as a close group of friends after their visit to the shrine; a delightful and neat closure.

Unfortunately, reality wasn't so simple. There was a considerable amount of ruckus around them today, and it wasn't solely because they were in the ever-

busy cafeteria. The group of four—Fuyuka, in particular—drew curious gazes from the students.

With a quick survey of their surroundings, one could tell they were the center of attention. All of the students, regardless of gender, glanced at them. Their inquisitive stares could be sorted into two categories overall—curiosity and fondness.

“Boy, oh boy. Look at ‘em staring us like that,” Chiaki said.

“Only thing we can’t really run away from,” Asahi replied.

“I’m sorry I’ve brought you so much unwanted attention,” Fuyuka apologized.

“No need to say sorry, Fuyu-Fuyu! It’s not your fault!”

“What Hina said. Besides, we’re cool with it. Right, Asahi?”

“Uh-huh. You shouldn’t let it get to you... well, I guess you can’t exactly ignore it,” Asahi said. *They’ve probably noticed the change in Fuyuka’s behavior.*

The frost enveloping “The Ice Queen,” Fuyuka Himuro, was slowly melting away. She wasn’t rejecting people—on the contrary, she was conversing and laughing along with a group of friends. The frigid personality she’d once embraced where she’d locked her heart away inside a glacier was now a past memory.

“Daaamn, man. Everyone’s caught the Himuro bug out here,” Chiaki observed.

“I’m sorry?” Fuyuka asked, confused.

“He means that you’re the talk of the town, Fuyu-Fuyu! Right, Asahi?”

“Guys. Stop putting me on the spot,” Asahi whined as he munched away at his lunch and dodged the pestering questions. *I don’t wanna admit it, but they’re right. Looks like everybody in the whole damn school is crazy about Fuyuka right now. If only she wasn’t a literal icicle. Every guy in the school would be head over heels for her.*

A conversation he’d previously had with Chiaki suddenly came to mind. His passionate ravings were well on their way to becoming a reality.

“People were buzzing in class! Everyone would *kill* for a chance to chat with her,” Hinami remarked.

“That’s crazy. She’s become a celebrity. You think we should hire a bodyguard for her?” Chiaki suggested.

“I think you’re blowing things out of proportion,” Fuyuka said.

“Nah, don’t sell yourself short. They’ll be swarming all over you like paparazzi the second you’re out on your own.”

“We might seriously look into getting you some security, Fuyu-Fuyu! You’re just too precious and cute! Some weirdos might try to jump in for a hug or two!”

Yeah, definitely not projecting there, Hinami, Asahi wanted to retort. He only bit his tongue out of kindness... or, rather, because the smirks he kept receiving from “The Obnoxious Couple” impeded him from articulating his thoughts. He could easily tell what those smiles meant from the flow of the conversation. “I’m not gonna be posing as her bodyguard, just so you know.”

“But we haven’t even *said* anything yet!” Hinami protested.

“I know what you two are gonna say before you even open your traps. Not like Fuyuka is bothered by it either way, right?”

“Of course not. I’m just a little taken aback by how many people want to speak to me, that’s all.”

“You heard her. She doesn’t need any security or whatever. Case closed.”

Even “The Obnoxious Couple” nodded in agreement.

Fuyuka’s predicament was the result of her huge leap forward in connecting with people; it was also testament to her commitment toward changing her frigid attitude. The students were probably confused by her abrupt change of character and weren’t entirely sure how to approach her yet.

Asahi was resolute in not interfering unless absolutely necessary. He and his other friends would watch from the sidelines and cheer her on.

I’m sure she’ll build meaningful relationships with people soon enough. I went through the same thing and ended up becoming friends with Chiaki and Hinami.

Pretty they know to butt out too, so there must've been a reason for the whole body guard suggestion.

Regardless of their intentions, it seemed that all was well.

"I've always wanted to relax while eating lunch, so I'm glad you guys are here," Fuyuka said.

"You got it. Pretty sure these two don't mind either," Asahi said.

"We don't!"

"Nope!"

Fuyuka had picked a... somewhat depressing way to word it, but she essentially just wanted to enjoy the company of her friends. And, naturally, no one on earth could possibly turn down her timidly-whispered request.

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Asahi's concerns about her around other people, which he'd waved off the day before, would turn out to be all too true.

There's Fuyuka, and... huh. Who're those guys with her?

It was lunch break, and Asahi stopped by Fuyuka's classroom on his way to the cafeteria. He was alone this time—"The Obnoxious Couple" each had their own business to attend to. Chiaki was... busy in the restroom with an upset stomach and Hinami was resubmitting an assignment.

Hinami was usually the one in charge of inviting Fuyuka over, since they were in the same class, so it was unusual for Asahi to pop in.

That was when he saw Fuyuka circled by multiple guys. He stopped dead in his tracks.

"Damn, girl, you're bangin'."

"People were right—she's a real babe."

"Hey, sexy, how's it hangin'? You've probably heard of us already, but we're from the soccer team."

Three guys, their uniforms unkempt and their hair thick with styling wax, chatted nonchalantly with Fuyuka. They all wore indoor slippers that indicated

they were senior students based on the color.

Unlike the boys' casual attitude, Fuyuka wore a rigid expression. It was far from a lighthearted, wholesome atmosphere.

"Wanna hang out with us after class? It'll be fun."

"I'm sorry, but I already have plans," Fuyuka declined.

"Hey, if it's with a girl, she can come too! *Epecially* if she's as cute as you, haha!"

"We can go grab somethin' to eat, okay? Our treat, obviously—to celebrate our new friendship. Whaddya say?"

The three punks were shamelessly flirting with Fuyuka, eliciting faint murmurs from the students who observed from afar. Everyone felt pity for Fuyuka, though nobody dared to lend a helping hand.

"Aight, let's exchange contact info for now. We'll hash out the details later," the leader of the group—his hair dyed a bright blond—approached Fuyuka and flashed an artificial, nasty smile.

Asahi couldn't just stand and watch any longer. He marched into the classroom to help Fuyuka.

"No," an austere voice rang across the classroom. "I don't know you well enough to give you my number or any other sort of contact information."

Her words might've ended up sounding harsh, but her tone was polite. She took care to avoid hurting their feelings. Despite Fuyuka's nickname around the school, her innate kindness had amassed her popularity and secured her exalted status amongst her peers.

The students allowed a relieved sigh to escape, while the three seniors stared at each other in bewilderment.

"Ice cold, dude. Thought you said she'd changed?"

"Hey man, that's just what some junior told me."

The two guys at the side argued back and forth, then peered at the leader of the group.

“Look, ‘Ice Queen,’ or whatever it is, miss me with the hard-to-get act. Let’s get *real* intimate.”

The brash blond reached his hand out. Fuyuka promptly took a few steps back in response.

“She just told you she’s not up for it,” Asahi cut in, coming between them and tossing Fuyuka a reassuring glance.

“Asahi!” she called out, her face lighting up.

The class only grew more turbulent, and onlookers stared from every direction. The three seniors bore vexed frowns, while Fuyuka was practically beaming with happiness behind Asahi.

“And who the hell are *you*, tough guy?”

“Just a friend of hers,” Asahi answered promptly.

“Listen here, pal—we were just having a nice ’lil chat with the lady. Go be a white knight somewhere else.”

“Really? That’s not how it looked to me.”

Asahi held his ground, keeping them away from getting closer to Fuyuka. The tumult grew as curious rubberneckers gathered in the hallway.



“Gah, whatever,” the blond guy spat and turned away. His two cronies followed behind. They exited the classroom without causing any more trouble. They likely figured that it wasn’t worth it to push things any further.

Suddenly, a round of applause rose in praise of Asahi’s bravery. Even the person at the center of all the drama—Fuyuka—joined in. He smiled awkwardly.

“Thank you, Asahi. Really.”

“We might need to invest in a bodyguard after all, huh?”

“I still don’t think that’s necessary. It’s just because it’s my first day socializing,” she said with a gentle grin. “But maybe I should hire you if I’m in the market for one.”

“Haha, no pressure.”

They both laughed, then headed out to the cafeteria.

“Oh yeah, you mentioned you had some plans or something. What’s on the agenda?” he asked.

“Having dinner with you,” she whispered to him, quietly enough so nobody could hear.

“Ah, so that’s what it was.”

It was still awfully noisy around them, but they paid it no heed as they walked together, side by side.

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Friday soon rolled around. Classes had ended for the day, kicking off the undisputed best time for all students—the weekend.

Normally, students had two days of unrestrained free time to look forward to, but that wasn’t always necessarily the case. It depended heavily on one’s school or what kind of after-school club they belonged to. In fact, it wasn’t unheard of to have classes held on Saturday or some sort of club practice.

None of that applied to Asahi, however, which meant he was excited to enjoy the full weekend... or was he?

Asahi exhaled heavily.

“Damn, man, that’s a big sigh. Something bad happen?” Chiaki inquired.

“Something like that.”

“Is it about Asahi-mania?”

Asahi slumped on his desk upon hearing that, letting out another profound sigh. He couldn’t even bring himself to muster a response. The weekend was practically knocking on the door, but he was already incredibly exhausted. The reason behind his gloomy demeanor was clear—the frenzied surge of “Asahi-mania,” as had Chiaki put it, over the past few days.

I didn’t gain a ton of popularity out of the blue or anything, I just got caught up in Fuyuka’s.

“Hey, Asahi—what’s your relationship to Himuro, exactly?” Chiaki echoed his classmates in a high-pitched, feminine tone.

“Spare me your impressions.”

“Aight, how about we mix things up with the male version?”

“God, no. That’s even worse.”

The winter break had been the pivotal changing point in “The Ice Queen’s” disposition.

If, hypothetically, a student existed who was the only one she addressed on a first-name basis, then it stood to reason why he’d be put under scrutiny. The fact that she got along incredibly well with said hypothetical student and that she was the opposite sex only added fuel to the fire.

Then there was the incident with the seniors a few days ago. Asahi had been accosted not only by his classmates, but even by seniors he’d never even met before.

“You sure you’re fine with the answer you’ve been giving people? You sound like an NPC repeating the same line over and over.”

“Like I have any other choice. We happened to be neighbors and got to know each other. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“I mean, you *are* telling the truth... Just a heavily trimmed version of it,”

Chiaki responded with a chuckle.

Asahi collapsed onto the desk again in an attempt to ignore it. *People will get really suspicious if I refuse to talk at all. But then again, telling the truth is only gonna cause more rumors. Damned if you do, damned if you don't.*

Realistically, all he could do was repeat the same dry response over and over again. He recalled that Fuyuka had told him—with a somewhat warped smile—that she'd been through much the same. He sighed heavily again.

"Does it really take that much out of you to talk about it?" Chiaki asked.

"The questions themselves are fine. It's the looks they give me, man."

"Ah, I feel you."

"You do?"

"A bit, yeah. I get them from time to time myself."

Although Chiaki's remark was ambiguous, Asahi understood what he was hinting at. If Chiaki and Hinami's reputation as "The Obnoxious Couple" was any indication, their flirting antics—which often disregarded any semblance of social convention—must've invited nasty glares from others. No doubt they were at the end of piercing stares that felt like they were getting stung by needles from behind.

"Himuro is pretty popular, dude. That goes without saying. Loads of guys are into her, so it's a given that one or two of 'em have it out for you."

"I don't really get why they would."

"It isn't rocket science—you seem closer to her than anybody else. You guys are like... something between friends and a couple. Heh, maybe you two *are* dating already for all we know."

"Like hell we are."

"Yeah, I get it. You guys are *friends*," he retorted in a suggestive tone. Fortunately, he didn't pursue the subject any further like he previously had during their shrine visit.

Asahi sighed again and sank hopelessly over his desk for a third time.

Chiaki—who genuinely empathized with his friend—stifled his patented smirk and patted Asahi’s shoulder. “It’s gonna take some time, but the rumors’ll blow over. We’ve just gotta wait.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Asahi said.

He was certain that the day when he’d be released from the pit of intrusive questions and bitter jealousy was within reach. Fuyuka was gradually becoming more familiar with students, both in her own class and the rest of the school. The contacts list on her phone was ever-growing with new entries.

Soon, she’ll have lots of people around that she can confidently call her friends. It’s just a matter of when that’s actually gonna happen. And it’s only natural that she’ll form close ties with some of them, to the point that they’ll be on a first-name basis. I won’t be any different from them then... I just happened to know her earlier, is all.

There would undoubtedly come a day where “The Ice Queen” would simply be known as “Fuyuka Himuro”—a sociable, pleasant girl who always wore a beaming smile. By then, she would be completely thawed out.

“Asahi,” a voice called out.

Asahi turned his head toward the noise. Speaking of the devil, it was Fuyuka and Hinami.

They’re both in another class. I guess they just randomly saw me and Chiaki here? Asahi wondered to himself. “Hey, Fuyuka. Staying in school even after classes? That isn’t like you.”

“That’s true. Normally I’d go straight home, but I couldn’t today,” she explained.

She and Hinami took a seat in the chairs closeby.

“Had something to take care of?” Asahi asked.

“Aoba introduced me to some people from another class.”

“Did my Hina do that? Nice going. A little networking never hurt nobody,” Chiaki said.

“Yes. I was nervous, but it was still a fun time,” Fuyuka replied with a sincere

smile. Still, a shadow of fatigue also hung over her.

“I’m gonna ask this just to make sure, but you haven’t forced her into this, right?” Asahi pressed the other girl.

“Of course not! I just know some guy who *really* wanted to speak with Fuyu-Fuyu, so I just asked her. She said it was okay!”

“Fine then,” Asahi said. *Thought she was dragging Fuyuka around like she did when we were at the shrine. But hey, if Fuyuka was okay with it, then I won’t complain. Plus, it’s just like Chiaki says—it’s important to expand her social circle.* “Who was it, by the way? Somebody I know?”

“It’s Ryouma Yamada. Y’know, the ace player of the soccer team,” Hinami replied.

“Of *course* it was him,” Asahi muttered. “How did you even get to know that guy? Isn’t he in a different class?”

“He’s a friend of a friend. You know how it is.”

“That’s my Hinalayan Yeti—an absolute beast at making friends!” Chiaki exclaimed with a smile.

I don’t get why Hinami’s all happy with being compared to some cryptid, but okay.

Some guys would have qualms about their girlfriend knowing so many people, much less being on such familiar terms with them, but those worries didn’t apply to “The Obnoxious Couple.” They were madly in love, after all.

The couple were soon engrossed in a world of their own; one where Asahi and Fuyuka weren’t allowed to step in. Asahi peeked at Fuyuka, intending to ask her a question. He encountered difficulties putting his request into words, however, Fuyuka made a proposal of her own.

“Do you want to walk home together, Asahi?”

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Asahi bid his friends farewell at the station and hopped onto the train which dropped him off at the closest station to his house. He usually would’ve cloistered himself from the outside world by listening to some music on his

headphones and either reading a book or fiddling with his phone, but not today. Fuyuka was with him, and they engaged in chitchat while swaying to the train's movements.

"Do you remember when I made curry a while ago?" she asked.

"Yeah, you pulled that off really well."

"I actually made one mistake when I prepared it. Do you know what it was?"

"Nope. Can't say I do. It was pretty tasty, and I didn't think anything was wrong with it."

"I... got some of the curry on my clothes," she admitted with a timid chuckle.

"Oof. How was I supposed to guess that? Actually, you know what? I might've heard you yelp or something."

"The only silver lining was that my clothes were dark... Still, they were some of my favorites. I can't say I wasn't upset," Fuyuka grumbled.

Her shoulders sagged in dejection, so Asahi offered a few words of encouragement. The train rapidly approached its destination whilst they spent the time talking about that night's dinner and the math quiz they'd had.

"Oh yeah, you spoke with a guy after classes ended, right? What's-his-face... Ryouma Yamada, right?" Asahi casually brought up something that had been weighing on his mind since earlier that day.

Asahi's information about the other boy was fragmented, and could be summed up as the following—Ryouma was handsome, popular with the ladies, and incredibly skilled at soccer. He was the team's best player, and—according to Chiaki—he commanded great respect from male students in the school.

I still vividly remember how everyone rallied around him when he scored that goal at the sports festival.

Ryouma was, for all intents and purposes, just another student at the school. Asahi's sudden interest was a symptom of the subtle changes taking place in his character.

"Yes, I did. Is he an acquaintance of yours?"

“Not exactly, but he is pretty well-known.”

“So it seems,” Fuyuka stated without conveying any notable inclination. Her lips curled into a slight grin before she continued, “He apologized to me on behalf of the three seniors from the other day. He’s a very nice, kind person.”

A vague unease spread over Asahi’s heart, a bizarre emotion he didn’t quite know how to handle. He was absorbed in thought when the announcer declared that they had arrived at their desired destination. The squeals of the grinding brakes brought the train to a halt and quieted the machinations of his own mind.

“I think this is the first time we’ve walked home together, isn’t it?” Fuyuka noted.

“Now that you mention it... I suppose so, yeah. ”

“We’ve known each other for quite a while, but this still feels new to me,” she said. They both passed through the ticket gate when she mumbled behind Asahi, “We were both probably avoiding it, deep inside.”

“You picked up on it?”

“Of course I did.”

Fuyuka’s choice of words was perfect, though it only applied to when they were specifically at school.

Students tended to walk home with the same group each time. Common choices were fellow members of a club, classmates, or friends who used to be in the same class. There were obviously some instances where someone tagged along as a spur-of-the-moment decision, but it would be a stretch to apply that to Asahi and Fuyuka. After all, they were in different classes, which meant their interactions there were limited.

I mean, technically “The Ice Queen” made it her life’s mission to keep people away from her. Now imagine if she started acting friendly with some random guy out of the blue—of course it’ll stick out like a sore thumb. The underlying rationale behind why they never walked to school together—despite being neighbors—was because being seen together at school put them under the spotlight. “Wanna just pretend we’re strangers at school?”

“What?” she replied after a pause.

“You know, it’s pretty annoying for both of us this way. All those rumors circulating, having to explain everything to everyone all the time...” he muttered. *It’s only after you’re on the receiving end of gossip like this—where people assume you’re dating, or even married—that you realize just how stressful it is.*

Denying the claims altogether wouldn’t help ease the spread, and it wasn’t like the two could possibly corral the entire school and explain their situation to them. Mentioning they have dinner together each night would simply add fuel to the fire. There weren’t many options available other than to reset their relationship... at least, while they were at school.

There’s no smoke without fire, after all. This way, we won’t have to worry about adding to the rumor mill, he concluded. “It’s probably too late anyways. The whole thing might backfire, and we’d just end up confirming their doubts. What a pain,” he lamented with a sigh.

His breath whitened into a wisp of vapor before disappearing. Much like his breath, Fuyuka’s expression seemed to have clouded over.

“Is spending time with you at school that much of a bother, Asahi? I still want to speak with you while we’re there and have lunch with you in the cafeteria... also, if possible, I’d like to walk to school and come home together.” Fuyuka’s voice grew progressively more feeble, and her pace gradually slowed until she came to a complete standstill. She reached out to grab the sleeve of Asahi’s jacket loosely. “Can we... keep being friends?”

Asahi turned to face her and found the image of a frail girl, who was imploring him with tear-filled eyes. Her plea and pathetic expression made it impossible to deny her request... not that he had any intention of doing so in the first place.

“I’m sorry, Fuyuka. I didn’t mean it like that. I don’t mind people gossiping about the two of us, per se; it’s having to deal with it that stresses me out,” Asahi muttered, fumbling over his words. He hadn’t recovered from seeing her like that, and took a few short breaths to compose himself. When he peered at her again, the words readily rolled off his tongue. “I hope we can still be friends.

Same as before.”

“Definitely! I hope we can be friends for a long time!” she replied happily, beaming.

Her expression made his heart skip a beat. He had gotten past the point where their friendship alone threw him for a loop, but it had been replaced by a new sensation entirely. It was a unique emotion that blossomed beautifully with each beat of his heart.

“So what do you want for dinner today?” he asked.

“We had fish yesterday, so how about a meat dish today?”

“Gotcha. If we hit the supermarket now, we’ll make it in time for the flash-sale.”

They both resumed walking; the distance between them had grown slightly closer.

Chapter Six

Strategy Meeting

The end of January loomed ahead.

The usual suspects—Asahi, Chiaki, and Hinami—were having lunch together in the cafeteria. Fuyuka, who had become a regular at their table, had a prior commitment with someone else.

“Fuyu-Fuyu has finally left the nest. They grow up so fast,” Hinami said.

“Are you her mother, or something?” Asahi joked.

“More like her BFF, thank you very much!”

“Big claim. Can you really back it up?”

“I-It’s true! We’re, like, the bestest of friends!” Hinami exclaimed. Her forced tone and the beads of cold sweat forming on her forehead, though, said otherwise.

“Not sure about that one, chief. Asahi’s probably closer to her than anyone else,” Chiaki, who usually played the part of yes-man to everything his girlfriend said, challenged her for a change.

“Ugh... that’s true.”

“And what’s up with ‘bestest,’ anyway? You in elementary school, or something?” Asahi retorted.

“Asahi’s in a total no-nonsense mood today; he’s gotta shut everybody down,” Chiaki joked.

“Don’t you feel jealous that she’s hanging out with somebody else?” Hinami asked.

“Nah. I want her to be friends with everyone.”

“Cute. Just like an elementary schooler.”

Asahi pouted at his friend’s mirrored insult.

“I mean, she’s fitting in already. She got invited to have lunch with another classmate, right? Never thought I’d see the day,” Chiaki said.

Indeed, Fuyuka had started to hit it off with others. The fact she was interacting with people other than Asahi, Chiaki, or Hinami was proof of that. Back when the semester had just begun, her frigid persona had still been very much alive in the other students’ minds, which meant there was an invisible glacial wall between her and everybody else.

Fuyuka hadn’t opened up her heart fully yet, as evidenced by the reluctant smile she wore and the tinge of hesitation in her voice. Still, her determination to form bonds with everyone, one step at a time, had touched their hearts. Her ice-cold personality had soon thawed around others, akin to snow melting into runoff. Soon, a new image of Fuyuka Himuro permeated their minds, and they realized she was a normal girl like any other.

“I’m so happy for her,” Hinami said.

“Me too,” Asahi agreed, his lips naturally curling into a wide grin.

Fuyuka had sincerely aspired to change, and watching it finally unfold in front of him was nothing short of delightful for Asahi. Chiaki and Hinami, who likely shared the same sentiment, looked at each other and laughed.

Actually, it feels sorta off... There’s something I don’t like about those smirks.

“So, what are you doing on February 1st, Asahi?” Hinami asked.

“Hina beat me to the punch, but yeah—I wanna know the answer to that one, too.”

“What are you guys on about?” Asahi replied, exasperated.

“Hahaha, nice one! Hear that, Chii-pie? Classic!”

“Haha, no, seriously! That’s a good one!”

“The Obnoxious Couple” exploded in a peal of hearty laughter, leaving Asahi in limbo. He didn’t understand what was so humorous about the situation.

“Wait, we’re talking about February 1st here, right? Isn’t that just another Saturday?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m not. What’s the big deal about that day?” Asahi replied honestly, which induced more wild laughter from Chiaki.

“You’re such a dork, Asahi, you know that?” Hinami said, puffing out her cheeks.

“Why are you mad at me? I don’t get it.”

“I’m sorry, man, but you messed up big time on this one,” Chiaki added.

“But I don’t have a clue what you guys are talking about.” Asahi pleaded.

He consulted with the calendar; there was nothing to indicate that it was anything other than a normal weekend. He tried to search the internet for any anniversaries. Surprisingly, it yielded multiple results.

“Is it the anniversary of the first national radio broadcast in the country?”

“Not even close!” Hinami yelled.

“Oh, I get it—it’s Spooky Day. You know, Feb-*boo*-ary and all?”

“*Bzzt-Bzzt!* Wrong again! Your jokes are the only thing that’s scary here!”

“Okay, okay. It says here that a second New Year is celebrated on that date as a Shinto custom. Something about sidestepping an unlucky year or whatever.”

“Noooope, that’s not it either! God, *someone’s* been slacking in their studies!”

“Ouch. Not gonna lie, that stings extra bad coming from you,” Asahi said. *Man, she’s not having any of it. Guess that day must be really important.*

“Asahi, my guy, what you’re looking for probably won’t be on the internet. Just saying,” Chiaki chimed in.

“Could’ve told me that sooner.”

“Sorry man, for real. This convo was just too hilarious,” Chiaki replied as he chuckled and nudged Asahi with his elbow.

I’m racking my brains over here and still nada, Asahi thought. “Just tell me what it is already. I’ll admit it—I’ve literally got no clue.”

“Whaaa... well, fine. Guess I’m gonna have to at this rate,” Hinami whined.

“It’s Fuyu-Fuyu’s birthday!”

Asahi had braced himself for the important bit of news that everybody seemed privy to except him, and it truly didn’t disappoint.

“Seriously?”

“Dead serious. Why would I lie about it?”

It doesn’t look like they’re playing a prank on me. So it’s Fuyuka’s birthday, huh? First I’ve heard about it.

“I’m gonna give it to you straight, Asahi—I thought you of all people would know,” Chiaki said.

“What I can’t figure out is how *you two* knew about it already.”

“It’s like, the second or third thing you ask people when you first meet them. You mean you don’t?”

“Nope.”

“What do you two usually talk about then?” Hinami asked with a dubious expression.

“Cooking and schoolwork.”

“And what else?” Hinami pressed.

“You know, gossip and stuff.”

Asahi’s straightforward answer didn’t seem to amuse Hinami, who slouched her shoulders and gaped in disbelief. Her response was a major overreaction in Asahi’s eyes. Her boyfriend wasn’t much better—he was holding his sides and guffawing. Asahi glared at them and sighed. He’d long lost track of how many he’d let out so far already.

“It does sound like something they’d do, though, you know?”

“Stole the words right outta my mouth, Chii-pie! Anywho, you better not forget to wish her a happy birthday, got it?” Hinami added seriously.

“Yeah, you won’t let it come and go without preparing something special for her, right?”

“She’s my friend. Obviously I’ll do something,” Asahi replied.

“Yup, that’s what I like to hear!” Hinami exclaimed.

Now that I’m actually aware of what’s going on, I’ve gotta do something to show I care, Asahi thought. He figured he’d cook up something a little more extravagant than usual, consisting of an assortment of her favorite dishes. Still, he felt like that alone wouldn’t be adequate to commemorate the occasion. Maybe I should bake a cake without her noticing. Something simple, like a shortcake or a sugary chocolate cake. Hmm, a fruit tart sounds like a great option, too... Then again, I could just go all-out with a Mont Blanc. Decisions, decisions...

Midway through his musings, an important detail finally struck him—he’d been brainstorming under the assumption that Fuyuka would be free on that day. He realized it’d be a good idea to assume she had plans.

She’d definitely catch on if I asked if she was free a few days before...

Asahi was deep in thought until Hinami clapped her hands together and flashed a smile.

“Now we’re all on the same page about Fuyu-Fuyu’s birthday, I’ve got one teensy little suggestion for you, Asahi!”

“You guys look like you’re up to something.”

“Always been quick on the uptake. I think you’re gonna like this one, man.”

Hinami, not wanting anybody else to hear, approached Asahi and whispered her proposal in his ear.

“You know what, that doesn’t sound half bad,” Asahi replied with a nod.

The couple threw their hands up in a high-five.

*

“... Mngh.”

Asahi rose with a groan. He had never been, nor ever would be, a morning person. His phone’s alarm woke him up, yet he remained covered under his futon, hoping to get a few more minutes of shut-eye.

The clutches of drowsiness were too pleasant to overcome, and he found himself drifting off again. Unfortunately, the ringing of the second alarm put an end to his snooze.

“Rise and shine, I guess...”

Asahi managed to remove himself from the warm futon despite the piercing winter cold, which made his body recoil in search of heat. He parted the curtains and basked in the sunlight which poured in through the window.

Making the brain realize it's morning helps.

With that, he began his standard morning routine.

He performed some light stretching, gave one big yawn, and washed his face. He entered the living room, turned on the TV, and went to the kitchen to grab a quick breakfast—a slice of toast with jam. As he ate, he listened to the news in the background. Then it was time to prepare his lunch box for the day. Finally, after making sure he looked presentable, he left his apartment.

All in all, his routine had amounted to about an hour and a half.

Another day, same as ever, he muttered to himself, blowing frosty air out of his mouth as he stepped out the door.

In an act of incredible cosmic coincidence—or perhaps it was the inevitable hand of fate—the neighboring door clicked open the moment Asahi stepped out.

“Ah,” a clear voice squeaked, a puff of warm air punctuating it.

“Morning, Fuyuka.”

“Good morning.”

After exchanging greetings, they began walking side by side. Neither of them spared any special thought to this.

“I haven’t seen you leaving this late before. You sleep in or something?” Asahi asked.

“Nothing like that, no. I just figured I...”

“What?”

“N-No, it’s nothing. Please don’t worry about it.”

They had recently talked about why they’d avoided walking to school together, and one key factor was that their daily rhythms were simply quite different.

Asahi had always assigned himself a strict timeline, one where he’d be able to make it to school *just* in the nick of time. An honor student like Fuyuka, however, was the type to arrive with ample time to spare until classes.

I got out of the house the same time I always do, so Fuyuka’s the one running late. He glanced at Fuyuka and noticed her dainty nose glow with a hint of red. It was cute enough to inspire him to humor an equally endearing thought. *What if she delayed herself on purpose?*

“It’s almost February,” she stated, trying to sound natural.

“Yeah, feels like winter is in full swing now.”

“Aren’t you cold with only a coat on?”

“A little, to be honest. But other than my face freezing off, I’m fine,” he said. “What about you? Feeling chilly?”

“I’m well-equipped against the cold, as you can see,” she smiled, peeking at him over her scarf. Asahi, however, wasn’t one bit convinced as he gazed downward.

“I mean, you say that but...” Asahi’s voice trailed off.

He directed his eyes—taking utmost care not to stare fixedly—at Fuyuka’s bottom half. Her skirt flitted just above her knees, which inspired little confidence that it offered her beautiful, slender legs any warmth at all.

“You worry too much, Asahi,” she said with a strained smile. “I have a secret weapon if it gets too cold for me to handle. You can relax.”

“Like what? Is a blue robot gonna hand you a wacky gadget or something?”

Fuyuka paused, then murmured, “I can’t tell if you’re joking or not.”

“Guess that one flew over your head.”

Fuyuka’s secret weapon, as it would happen, was a pair of tights. Asahi mulled

over that piece of information until they arrived at the train station. They both passed the ticket gate and boarded the jam-packed train. Their arrival coincided with the morning rush hour, which meant large crowds of office workers and students, and a lack of available seats.

“I never knew it got so packed at this hour,” Fuyuka said.

“I think it would’ve been less crowded if we came a bit earlier.”

“Yes, we probably could’ve found some seats.”

They quickly secured themselves—Asahi clung to the handle suspended in front of him, while Fuyuka leaned against a corner—before the train departed. The announcer soon read out the next station.

“Say, Fuyuka. Is there anything you’d like to get your hands on?” Asahi inquired.

“What do you mean?”

“Like... something you’ve always wanted, but never got the chance to buy. You know, that sort of thing,” he clarified, trying to bring up the subject in the most natural way he could manage.

This was all an attempt to gather information for February 1st. Ideally, he would’ve preferred to have a general idea of what she liked so he could surprise her. Unfortunately, Asahi wasn’t capable of much subtlety.

I’d rather ask the person what they want, rather than getting them a gift based on what I think they would want. So much less awkward that way.

Regrettably, Asahi’s question didn’t proceed according to plan.

After a good minute of consideration, Fuyuka finally replied, “I can’t really think of anything.”

“Nothing at all?” he probed, eyes wide.

“Nothing comes to mind, no.”

“You’ve never wanted anything *ever*?”

“That’s not it,” she said, then clarified, “I guess I’m satisfied with what I have

right now.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t want stuff.”

“I just mean that my life has been so enjoyable recently, that...”

Of course, her response only complicated things for Asahi, who was hoping to gauge what she wanted for a gift.

Fuyuka, who was unaware of his predicament, bashfully added, “Coming to school with me like this is more than enough.”

“There’s no way that’s true.”

“But it is.”

Fuyuka’s frank words left him a bit embarrassed. He sought refuge in the time-honored tradition of staring out the window. The sun was dazzling in the morning sky—it reminded him of her smile.

I get why she’d feel that way. She’s just stepped into a brand new world after all this time of watching from afar. It makes sense she’s still in the honeymoon period.

He was happy for her as the person who’d encouraged her to take a step forward. Nevertheless, a smidgen of anxiety brewed within him. He couldn’t quite place it. This mysterious emotion’s true form remained indiscernible, just like the clouds out the window.

“Eep!”

A short cry sounded out, followed by a sudden soft sensation on Asahi’s arms.

The train had come to an abrupt stop, and all the passengers had tumbled forward. Asahi, who hung onto the handle, had managed to withstand it without tripping. The same couldn’t be said about Fuyuka, who had just been standing in a corner. She’d lost her footing and plunged toward Asahi. He reacted by inadvertently wrapping his arms around her back.

They both stood in a silent embrace for a moment before Fuyuka said, “I’m sorry.”

“Nah, don’t sweat it,” Asahi replied.

Their accidental hug caused his heart rate to spiral out of control. It was pounding so loudly, in fact, that he had to take a half-step back in fear that she might've been able to hear it otherwise.

Fuyuka was much the same. She hung her flushed face down, her heart racing away in secret.

It's probably for the best to keep some distance between us, Asahi mused as he quietly waited for them to reach the station near the school.

*

"So that's why you called me over." Chiaki smiled cheekily.

Classes were over for the day, and the two friends had settled down at the food court of a relatively large mall. They were holding a strategy meeting to find the best possible present for Fuyuka.

After a considerable amount of thought—and his failed attempt earlier to ask her what she wanted—Asahi turned to the only person who could offer a solution to his dilemma.

Chiaki had expressed great excitement and accompanied Asahi to buy a gift himself.

"Aight, so do you have any clue what to get her?" Chiaki asked.

"Nope, drawing a blank over here."

"C'mon now, didn't you say you were gonna think of something?"

"Yeah, I know. This is the best I could do."

"I expected better, man, honestly."

Asahi would normally be the one telling off Chiaki, though he refrained from complaining. There was nobody else he could count on right now.

Chiaki's pretty used to getting gifts since he's got a girlfriend and everything. I'm sure he's got some great advice to share.

"Okay, so listen up—it's the thought that counts when you're buying a present, right? But that doesn't mean you should go and buy literally *whatever*, okay?"

“Sounds about right,” Asahi said.

“Obviously, the nature of the gift changes based on how intimate you are with the person. Think of it like this: you’d be pretty weirded out if your friend got you a diamond ring, right? Same way you’d be disappointed if you received some dried squid or something from your actual girlfriend.”

“I dunno, man... I feel like some people might appreciate it.”

“Uh, to each their own then, but... *ahem*. Anyways, it all boils down to getting a gift that’d make the other person happy.”

“Which is my biggest problem. I’ve got no clue what Fuyuka would like...”

“Oh, right. Oops!” Chiaki laughed his gaffe off, sticking his tongue out playfully.

“Didn’t you just state the total obvious, though?”

“It’s *obvious* for a *reason*, bro. There’re lots of guys out there who drop the ball by giving others something *they* like instead of what the receiver wants.”

Asahi found Chiaki’s advice more sagely than he expected.

That makes a lot of sense when I think about it. More so because it’s coming from firsthand experience. Hmm, a gift that would make Fuyuka happy... nothing really comes to mind. Just goes to show that I don’t actually know Fuyuka that well.

The more Asahi ruminated, the more he came to realize that his understanding of Fuyuka was superficial and minimal. They spent much of their time with each other, but it was mostly cooking together or doing schoolwork. That was why his knowledge was limited and filled with so many gaps.

Hell, I didn’t even know when her birthday was.

For the longest time, Asahi and Fuyuka had kept a comfortable distance from one another—not too close, yet not too far apart. However, now Asahi experienced an increasing, almost nagging, discomfort. He felt they might be drifting apart.

“Don’t blow a fuse thinking about it, man. I’m sure Fuyuka’d be delighted with anything you get for her.”

“Contradicting yourself already?”

“Don’t be like that. Try to think of what you’d like to give her, okay? Give it a go.”

With his motivation rekindled, Asahi ruminated on his friend’s idea. *It might’ve just hit me!* He suddenly felt like he’d made a breakthrough. He was about to stand up and begin his search anew when Chiaki stopped him in his tracks.

“I happen to have a pretty good idea for a present,” he said, his smirk harboring the worst of premonitions. “First, we gotta get you one of those long ribbons.”

“Like the kind you wrap gifts with?”

“Exactly. Just wrap that bad boy all around yourself. Then go up to her and say, ‘Hey girl, *I’m* your birthday present this year!’”

“Putting any faith in you was the worst mistake made this century.”

“Hey, where’re you going?! It was just a joke, man, c’mon!”

Asahi left his seat, making his way to the nearby storefront.

Delicious-looking sweets lined the shelves, some even modeled after certain characters. He was amazed that such desserts—ones which not only obsessed over taste, but also presentation—were sold for so cheap. Asahi, having developed a newfound admiration for the craft, glanced along the showcase before delving further in the store.

“You’re gonna buy a cake after all?” Chiaki asked as he caught up to Asahi.

“Not exactly...”

“All right, man. I’m excited to see what you’ve got in store.”

“Mhm. I’m gonna give it my best shot.”

He and Chiaki both went back to roaming the vast mall.

*

Although the act of window-shopping was scarcely associated with male high school students, Asahi actually found it quite fun.

He took his time visiting each store, wondering idly if living by himself had contributed to a change in mindset. He certainly felt like he was starting to adopt a homemaker-like mentality.

Chiaki, on the contrary, wasn't the least bit interested in the whole ordeal. Still, he was managing to exercise remarkable patience—a trait he'd picked up from accompanying Hinami on similar trips.

They both made small talk as they moved up to the second, then third floor. Unfortunately, they still hadn't found anything befitting Fuyuka.

"You've already got your gift? What the hell, man?" Asahi complained.

"You forget that I already had my eyes set on what to get for my Hina."

"You could've fooled me, Mr. Well-prepared."

"Love it or hate it, this is what peak performance looks like," he flaunted proudly. Asahi found himself unable to disagree. "You bought a pretty cool thing yourself, though."

He pointed at the paper bag Asahi was carrying.

"I mean... I suppose so," Asahi mumbled.

An apron had randomly happened to catch his eye while they were at a store which mainly dealt in selling daily necessities and other convenient goods. He'd recalled a conversation with Fuyuka not long ago when she'd grumbled that she'd gotten some of the curry on her clothes. That was when the idea had dawned on him—he could get Fuyuka an apron, since he'd never seen her use one.

It'd be pretty handy to have around if we're gonna keep cooking together.

Nonetheless, Asahi—despite Chiaki's efforts to encourage him—wasn't sure about his choice in gift. It seemed too practical.

Thus, the boys found themselves on the fourth floor of the mall, their pursuit ongoing. The number of trendy-looking shops was daunting, but they carried on.

They opted to step into the accessory shop. The store was entirely populated by girls, so the two male students in uniform stood out considerably.

“Just gonna let you know, man—you need to be extra careful when buying an accessory for a girl,” Chiaki warned.

“I know that.”

They discussed the topic at length. One of the main points of contention was that gifting an accessory to a girl one wasn't on intimate terms with had a tendency to be frowned upon.

Even if it was someone you were close with, getting something like this before knowing their tastes properly seems risky. Since it's something she's gonna wear in public, personal preference plays a huge part. Hell, some people won't even wear a gift if it's too cheap. Plus, my personal taste'll come into play with these things, and I guess Fuyuka might feel awkward about this kind of gift in general...

Simply put, when one considered the circumstances of their relationship, jewelry probably wasn't the best option. Regardless, there was nothing to lose by just checking.

Asahi came to a sudden halt in front of a particular item. “This is pretty nice...”

He imagined Fuyuka's delighted face as she put on the glittering accessory inside the showcase. That thought alone made him feel like he had finally found the perfect present he'd been searching for.

Chapter Seven

Happy Birthday!

The much anticipated February 1st finally arrived.

Asahi had arranged to meet Fuyuka slightly later than usual. Sure enough, the intercom rang at the right time. That was his cue to kill the lights in his apartment. He made his way through the dark, aided by his phone's flashlight, and opened the door nonchalantly.

"Good eveni—umm... Why is it pitch black here?" Fuyuka asked.

"Sorry about that. I tripped the main breaker by accident."

"How did you manage that?"

"You know, I was just messing around and tripped it. Happens to the best of us."

It was a clumsy excuse, even by his own assessment, but he stuck with it. Fuyuka, for her part, didn't seem to find it suspicious at all. She followed Asahi after she removed her shoes at the entrance.

"It feels a bit strange being in the room when it's all dark like this... even though I've been here so many times before," she commented.

"Afraid?"

"Wh-Who, me? Of the dark? Neve—Eep!" She shrieked and grasped his clothes. "D-Did you hear that just now?"

"It's just your footsteps, Fuyuka."

"No, it was coming from over there! In front of us!"

"Must be your imagination. Anyway, wait here, okay? I'll go flip the breaker," he said.

It weighed on his heart to leave Fuyuka behind when she was so frightened, but he bore through it.

One, two, three! He counted in his mind, then turned on the electricity.

Bright light engulfed the room, and everyone winced at the sudden contrast.

“Huh?” Fuyuka gawked after her sight had gradually adapted, speechless at the sight which lay before her.

“Fuyu-Fuyu!”

“Hey there, Himuro!”

“Fuyuka!”

Hinami, Chiaki, and Asahi called her name and popped the crackers they held in their hands. A tumultuous crackling sound arose, accompanied by a faint burning aroma that hung in the air.

“Happy birthday!” they shouted in unison.

“What the... My birthday?” Fuyuka faltered. She remained rooted to the spot, dumbfounded.

Chiaki and Hinami exchanged glances and smirked, obviously thrilled with how surprised she was. Everything had gone according to plan.

“The three of us got together and figured we’d surprise you on your birthday!” Hinami exclaimed.

“Yup, we’ve been waiting for a while,” Chiaki added.

“The Obnoxious Couple” seemed incredibly proud and utterly satisfied with how the surprise had been a success. Why wouldn’t they be? They had been meticulously planning the party for a while, and had been busy with the preparations since that afternoon.

The walls of Asahi’s apartment—normally a plain, uniform white—were now furbished with colorful helium balloons and round paper garlands. On top of these, the phrase: “Happy Birthday, Fuyu-Fuyu!” had been written in large red letters.

“Did you make all of this food, too?” Fuyuka asked.

“You betcha! It was mostly Asahi, but I helped!” Hinami explained.

“The cooking team benched me, so I was in charge of decorations,” Chiaki said.

The table was garnished with an arrangement of sumptuous dishes, all of which catered to Fuyuka's taste. Though it had been garnished to inspire joy in Fuyuka, it still pleased the organizers greatly. Still, the spread had hit the mark; there was no doubt that the most elated of them all was the one it had been made for—Fuyuka.

"Asahi, Aoba, Kikkawa... Thank you... I can't describe how happy I am right now," Fuyuka said. Tears gathered in her eyes and began to roll down her cheeks. Although it would normally be a cause for concern, these were tears of joy. She wiped her eyes and smiled with unbridled glee. "This is all so much. Do I even deserve something this wonderful?"

"Course you do, girl! It's your b-day! You know we're gonna party hard!"

"Preach, Hina. It's your day, Himuro! Better enjoy it to the fullest!" Chiaki added.

"The Obnoxious Couple" were having the time of their lives in the background.

"Told you they were great people," Asahi whispered to Fuyuka.

"You were right! They're wonderful friends."

Fuyuka brushed away another trail of tears, then beamed so brightly that it warmed Asahi's heart. The living room was particularly lively today, brimming with smiles and laughter.

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The four of them relaxed on the sofa after they'd enjoyed dinner and finished washing the dishes.

All eyes were on the TV, which had the character select screen of a fighting game displayed on it. This particular game boasted a wide range of characters to choose from, and featured deep mechanics while also sporting a deceptively simple goal: launch the opponent off the stage.

After everybody selected a character, the teams—Asahi and Fuyuka versus "The Obnoxious Couple"—were thrown into battle.

"What the—Asahi! No items!" Chiaki yelled.

“You heard my Chii-pie! Fight like a man!”

“Pretty rich coming from the guys who chose the arena to be like this,” Asahi retorted.

He and Chiaki were veterans at the game. Although Hinami was more of a casual player, she could still put up a good fight. Fuyuka, on the other hand, was a complete beginner. It was her first time playing the game, so she wasn’t used to the complicated controls. At the moment, she was just strolling along the platform.

“It looks pretty bad, Hina! We’re getting wrecked by Asahi even though he’s basically solo!”

“Change of plans—let’s focus on Fuyuka!”

“The Obnoxious Couple” set their sights on mercilessly striking down the newbie.

“Ah! Wh-What do I do, Asahi?!” Fuyuka pleaded.

“Just press the red button on the controller,” Asahi said, employing nimble movements to provide cover for her.

“O-Okay!”

She followed his instructions. Within a second, her character began to glow in a rainbow gleam, then unleashed a brilliant beam in front of her.

“Wha—! I thought we all made a deal, no special moves!” Chiaki protested.

“We’ve been knocked off the stage, it’s over,” Hinami groaned.

The word “WINNER” appeared on screen in giant letters, congratulating the pair’s victory.

“Did you see that, Asahi? We did it!” Fuyuka exclaimed.

She threw up her hand in Asahi’s direction, seeking a high five. Asahi timidly inched his palm closer to give her one, producing a gentle clap sound.

“Dammit. You’re telling me our love just wasn’t deep enough to win...?” Chiaki whined.

“Sounds more like a skill issue, man,” Asahi replied.

“Oh, hell no! You didn’t just go there! One more!”

A series of rematches commenced with the same teams as before. Chiaki and Hinami were able to win the first round, but Asahi and Fuyuka secured the second victory. They played an additional round with shuffled teams before switching to a different game.

They chose a racing game next. Fuyuka thoroughly had fun with it, squealing like a delighted child despite struggling with the controls.

“There are so many curves on this course! It’s so difficult to navigate!”

“Better get used to it soon, or you’re gonna smash against the walls,” Asahi warned.

“I’m doing my best, but... I can’t make the turns properly,” she said, mimicking her character’s attempts to drift with her body.

Her upper body would occasionally brush against Asahi’s shoulder or head when she swayed sideways, her cheeks flushed red each time. Her blush was adorable, and it proved increasingly challenging for Asahi to remain composed.

The curtains of the evening slowly drew over the sky as the four of them continued to play games into the small hours of the night.

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“I suppose it’s about time, eh?” Chiaki asked, winking at Hinami.

“Mhmm,” Hinami nodded as she looked at Asahi. He returned her gesture.

“Are you guys going home?” Fuyuka asked, looking slightly dejected.

“Not just yet,” Hinami replied with a shake of her head.

Asahi headed to the kitchen and removed a white box from the fridge. Fuyuka—her curiosity piqued—stared at him with interest.

“Nuh-uh-uh, no peeking allowed! You just sit there and look pretty for now!”

“B-But why?”

“You’ll see in a second.”

“You heard Chii-pie,” Hinami added.

The pair ushered Fuyuka into the same chair she'd sat at to eat dinner. Asahi was making the final preparations. He emptied the contents of the box onto a white plate and cautiously carried it over so that it wouldn't fall apart.

"Again, happy birthday, Fuyuka," Asahi said softly.

He held a handmade shortcake, which was decorated with simple, yet elegantly piped whipped cream and elaborately cut fruits. A chocolate name plate sat proudly in the center of the cake, displaying Fuyuka's name and congratulatory wishes in a creamy white.

"Is this...?"

"You guessed it—it's your very own birthday cake! Asahi here worked his butt off on this one," Hinami said.

"Yup, it was all him," Chiaki added.

Due to time constraints, Asahi had only had the day before to make the cake, but he'd spared no effort in baking it. He'd had his mother—a renowned pastry chef—supervise the whole process beforehand, and the paste was sensational as a result.

"Here's your share." Asahi divided the cake into four slices using a long kitchen knife, and gave the piece with the chocolate plate to Fuyuka.

She elegantly removed a bite-size piece from the tip and brought the fork to her mouth. She nibbled on it, and the longer she chewed, the wider her grin became.

"So, what d'you think?" Asahi asked.

"It's delicious!" she exclaimed, beaming so dazzlingly that one feared they might go blind if they looked too long.

They both shared a special moment as Chiaki and Hinami receded from view, smirking as they gazed at the other two from behind. After a while, "The Obnoxious Couple" took out gift bags of their own.

"Have this, Fuyu-Fuyu! Your present!"

"Here's one from me too."

“Presents for me? You honestly shouldn’t have...”

“Don’t be like that! It’s your special day.”

“You said it, Hina! Making the main girl happy is what it’s all about!”

Fuyuka decided to open the presents right then and there. She carefully peeled off the wrapping. She received a set of three essential oils from Chiaki, each with its own mood to be enjoyed. Hinami had given her a jar of skin lotion—the latest offering from the brand Fuyuka used, and which was well-known overseas.

Guess you can always opt for Hinami’s approach if you’re both girls.

The two presents clearly had a lot of thought put into them, and were both practical and sensible. Fuyuka expressed her profound gratitude for them multiple times.

“Here, Fuyuka.” Asahi handed over a paper bag, which Fuyuka gladly accepted.

“Can I open it?”

Asahi gave her an approving nod, and she immediately began unpacking the item inside. The gift Asahi had painstakingly chosen—after a great deal of consideration—was a light-blue apron with a lovely snowman embroidered on it.

“Whoa, it’s super cute! That’s gonna look amazing on you!” Hinami exclaimed.

“Hell yeah, it will! D’you know how long it took him to pick that one? Ages, man! I’m telling you!”

“You promised not to say that!” Asahi cried.

Amidst the varied reactions to the gift, Fuyuka—who had raised the apron closer to examine it—responded, “Thank you so much, Asahi. This gift is so like you. It’s fantastic. I’ll start using it tomorrow!” She paused, then continued, “Thank you, everyone, for throwing this wonderful birthday party for me! I mean it from the bottom of my heart.”

Fuyuka beamed, holding the apron tightly. Her words of gratitude brought a

smile to everyone's face, and they all felt that the party had been more than worth it.

The four of them relished the remainder of their sweet night together until it was time for "The Obnoxious Couple" to leave.

*

"Fuyuka," Asahi called out.

"Yes, what is it?" she replied cheerfully.

The party had come to an end, and "The Obnoxious Couple" were already on their way home. All of them had helped clean up the room before the rowdy pair departed.

She sounds like she had fun today, he thought before he pulled out a tiny, white, rectangular box. "I actually have one more gift for you."

If any onlookers were to magically appear in the room, they could've easily mistaken this interaction for a proposal. He felt butterflies in his stomach. Fuyuka seemed a bit tense too, for some reason. A peculiar atmosphere pervaded the room, though Asahi attempted to dispel it by breathing deeply and calming himself.

"You can tell me if you don't like it, okay? I'm satisfying myself more than anything by giving you this."

With that, he opened the white box.

"Gorgeous..." she muttered.

The box was padded with blue velveteen, and atop it was a pair of glistening metal, snowflake-shaped earrings. Asahi had loved them from the first time he'd laid eyes on them; they had instantly reminded him of Fuyuka.

"These are clip-on?" she asked.

"Yeah, they just slide on and hold onto your ears."

"That's good to hear. It would've taken me some courage to pierce mine." Fuyuka noted. She lifted both of her hands to her ears, holding the jewelry in her fingertips. "How do they look?"

She drew up her black hair, unveiling her small ears underneath. The earrings flickered and sparkled splendidly by her earlobes. It was a perfect match combined with Fuyuka's glamor.

"Beautiful—I mean, the earrings! They're great on you," Asahi sputtered, mortified that he unintentionally repeated what he'd mumbled back on Christmas Eve.

Seeing him flustered, Fuyuka smiled enchantingly and took a step forward. Despite being next to him, she spoke in a hushed voice, "I'd be delighted with anything you got for me. As long as it's from you."

Asahi's ears were dyed pink upon hearing her tender whisper. Fuyuka's own ears reached the same hue, and he could only wonder if the new earrings were to blame.

Their bodies and hearts had set ablaze, heedless of the frosty month of February which had only just begun.

Chapter Eight

Changing Feelings

A few days had passed since the great success that had been Fuyuka's birthday party.

She had been in a great mood since then, as she'd already made use of Chiaki's essential oil set in her room, and was in the middle of testing out the new skin lotion that Hinami had given her. She had been smiling much more frequently lately, and she had been enjoying school more too. Naturally, Fuyuka also cherished the presents she'd received from Asahi.

"Now you finally look the part, wearing that apron and all," Asahi said.

"Does it make it seem like I can cook properly?"

"I dunno... someone who *can* cook properly wouldn't get distracted when handling a knife," Asahi teased.

Fuyuka pouted, not one bit amused by his quip.

In truth, the apron was a perfect fit. It was light blue and rather nondescript in design. That served Fuyuka very well, however, as it emanated both elegance and class the second she'd put it on.

I bet she can pull off anything.

His other gift—the earrings—had been carefully stored away for a special occasion, or so Fuyuka had told him.

He quietly watched her from the side as she cut vegetables. His imagination began to run wild, and he wondered whether or not this was what it was like to have a wife. Of course, such illusions were promptly banished with a quick shake of his head.

"Well, I personally really like it..." she mumbled mostly to herself and the chopping board she was staring at.

"Aww, no need to get all sulky. You're doing the murderous eyes thing again, by the way."

“Please don’t speak to me while I’m holding the knife. I might *accidentally* slip, and things could end with a trip to the ER.”

“Uh, scary, much? I don’t remember you being this violent.”

It was a testament to how close they’d gotten to each other, in a... twisted sort of way. Fuyuka had been exerting less restraint recently and occasionally made chilling remarks out of the blue. Catching glimpses of her true character became a more frequent occurrence.

“And I was just thinking of complimenting you, but now you’re out of luck,” Asahi added.

Fuyuka’s ears perked up upon hearing those words, and Asahi couldn’t stifle his laughter in time. He had her all figured out. She stared daggers at him, and he quickly apologized before literal knives got involved.

Asahi found her reactions so amusing that he cracked jokes and teased her every now and then. It seemed some degree of moderation was still in order, though.

Guess I never grew up past elementary school, Asahi mused. “It suits you well. I mean it. Definitely makes you seem like you’ve got the whole cooking thing down.”

“Would it have hurt you to say so from the start?!”

She turned her face away, disgruntled. Her lips belied her expression as they began to curl up into a grin. Fuyuka’s typically gentle disposition, coupled with this exceedingly endearing part of her personality, stirred up a mysterious emotion within Asahi’s core.

They stood in the kitchen, chatting and preparing dinner together once more. Asahi caught himself earnestly wishing that this daily routine would remain eternal.

*

“I... love, Asahi,”

Asahi jumped off the sofa at those words. “Jesus, you startled me.”

“I could say the same with how you leapt off the couch like that,” Fuyuka

replied, surprised.

Asahi had left Fuyuka to wash the dishes after they'd had dinner, but it'd been some time since then. He'd been dozing off on the sofa when Fuyuka had approached and said something he'd only caught an unfortunate fragment of.

"Sorry, what did you say just now?"

Asahi had it in his head that Fuyuka was about to tell him something of great importance, so he settled back on the sofa and prepared himself mentally.

Fuyuka cleared her throat and withdrew a few centimeters back. She wore a serious expression as she said, "I want to know what dishes you love, Asahi."

Asahi sighed.

"Wh-What? Should I not have asked that?" Fuyuka asked anxiously.

"Nah, nah, it's nothing." Asahi shook his head; he was mostly sighing at himself and his dumb brain. "But yeah, my favorite dishes..."

"Yes. I'd like to know, if that's okay."

"I mean, fine by me. What made you wanna know?"

"Nothing, just that... I've never had the chance to ask," Fuyuka said. Although the way she averted her eyes aroused suspicion.

"I like French cuisine the most, thanks to my parents."

"I see. What sort of dishes are they?"

"Hmm... something along those lines of galette, bouillabaisse, that sorta stuff. Oh, I could also always go for a good Hamburg steak."

She vigorously tapped away at her phone, writing down memos using the note-taking app. "How about sweets? Anything you particularly like?"

"Candy, pastries, cake...things like that," Asahi listed all the confections he could think of. "I eat chocolate for my main source of sugar."

Fuyuka's expression brightened upon hearing those last words.

The brief Q&A session drew to a close. Fuyuka seemed satisfied with the information she obtained. She pocketed her phone—which also substituted for

a memo book—and began preparing to leave for her apartment.

Asahi found himself wishing the conversation wouldn't end, so he spoke up. "What about you, Fuyuka? What's your favorite dish?"

"Who, me?"

"Yeah. Like, I know you enjoy eggs with your food, but that's about it."

"My favorite dish, hmm..." Fuyuka contemplated, resting her hand upon her chin.

Asahi was reminded of the Christmas Eve they spent together. He wanted to learn the reason why she preferred eggs in her dishes.

She told me it's because it was her mother's speciality. It was a convincing explanation, given that food preferences tended to become firmly rooted from childhood. Still, Asahi sensed a dark past looming behind that reason. He'd caught the sadness in her expression back then. *It's just a hunch on my part, but I really worry when she seems sad.*

"Probably anything you cook for me, Asahi," she said, smiling softly.

Asahi paused, then mumbled, "Thanks."

He'd confined his gratitude into a single word in fear that she'd sense how much that had meant to him. The beating of his heart was soon replaced with a rhythmic tone coming from Fuyuka's phone—she'd received a new message.

*

The next day, after classes, Asahi and Chiaki went to a run-of-the-mill family restaurant. There was nothing out of the ordinary, except that Asahi was unusually dispirited.

"But yeah, man—you should've seen Hina, she was so shocked," Chiaki said, rambling on about something.

"Was she now..." Asahi replied without really listening.

He was zoned out. He'd stare off blankly into the distance, then collapse on the table and bury his face between his arms from time to time. He was so absentminded today that it perplexed his friend.

“Excuse me? Is there a Doctor on this fligh—”

“Dude, what’re you even doing?” Asahi interrupted him.

“Oh nice, you’re back from the dead. I saw you black out, so I thought you were sick or something.”

“I’m just tired. I haven’t been getting much sleep. Nothing to go crazy about.”

“That’s been happening a lot these days, huh? Where’s that healthy boy gone?”

Asahi yawned in response.

“Damn. Whatever it is, seems serious.”

Chiaki was somewhat jarred, but Asahi simply didn’t have the willpower to come up with a retort. He recalled yesterday’s events.

Fuyuka’s phone had received a text. The sender’s name was familiar—Kaori Tachibana. The message read:

I shall be reassuming my duties as your humble maid come next week, Lady Fuyuka.

Fuyuka’s face as she read was tinged with surprise and melancholy.

I don’t understand why she’d be unhappy. I mean, having a caretaker would be a huge help when it comes to cooking and just general life.

By the time she’d received the text, it had gotten very late in the evening yesterday by that point so they parted ways just after she received the message. Asahi was left with mixed emotions swirling within him. Kaori’s return was definitely a good thing for Fuyuka, but also meant that she probably didn’t need to come over and eat anymore.

I get that the arrangement we have now can’t go on forever. I just can’t get over the fact we’re gonna cut it off so suddenly...

“I think I got it, Asahi—you’re so hung up about next week, you can’t sleep!” Chiaki stated, pointing his finger at the other boy.

Next week is when her maid is coming back, and God knows I’m not excited for it. Suppose Chiaki wouldn’t know anything about it, though. “Not exactly...”

“Huh. Thought you were getting all worked up for the 14th.”

“Why? What’s happening on the 14th?” Asahi asked.

“You gotta be kidding, man.”

Chiaki opened the calendar on his phone and thrust the screen at his friend’s face. It showed a mark around the 14th—which happened to be about a week away. Bold red letters around the date declared: Valentine’s Day.

Oh, yeah... now that I think about it, I have been seeing Valentine’s decorations around town, Asahi recalled. “Almost forgot this holiday was a thing.”

“There he goes again, busting out the cliché ‘Not interested,’” Chiaki joked.

“What?”

“It’s that one famous JRPG protagonist’s favorite phrase. You know the one, right?”

“Yeah, I’m aware of *that*,” Asahi retorted. What he truly wanted to know was what his friend had meant by his joke. There was little hope of him clarifying it now, though.

“Remember what you did last year? You just went home like the whole thing never existed,” Chiaki said with a strained smile.

Asahi, who had always been indifferent to romance, was naturally disinclined toward Valentine’s Day. There was a high chance that wouldn’t be the case this year, however.

“You hoping to receive some chocolate from Himuro this year?” Chiaki, who had basically just read Asahi’s mind, inquired with a grin.

“I might be.”

“Yeah, figured that much—wait. Hold the phone and cancel my meetings! Am I hearing this right?!” Chiaki cried, his eyes flying wide open.

“It’s not that big a deal. Fuyuka’s interested in making some. That’s all.”

“Do go on, my friend. Please elaborate.”

“There’s not much else to say. I’m the one who’s teaching her how to cook, so

I *am* curious myself, but... Why are you smirking at me like that?"

"Smirking like what?" Chiaki joked, feigning innocence. "Damn man, you've changed a lot."

"How so?"

"Pretty clear to me that you're a lot more jittery these days," Chiaki noted with a laugh. "I think it's a change for the better."

"In regards to what, exactly?"

"You know, just in general and stuff."

I can't tell if I'm any different myself.

At least the change his friend had noticed was a positive one.

"I hope you end up getting some chocolate from Himuro, man," Chiaki teased playfully.

Asahi gulped down his juice without replying.



*

After leaving the family restaurant, Asahi boarded the train and began to make his way home.

He opted to stop by the nearest supermarket so he could purchase the ingredients for dinner. Asahi curated a menu in his head as he walked until he noticed a familiar face. He thought he was mistaken at first, but the dainty blue ribbon—which contrasted strongly against the inky black hair it had been tied to—dispelled all doubt.

“Yo,” he called from behind.

“Wha...? O-Oh, it’s you Asahi.”

Fuyuka turned to face him, surprised. She was visibly flustered.

“What d’you have there?” Asahi asked.

“N-Nothing at all,” she said.

Asahi had seen her conceal something behind her as soon as she realized he’d called out to her. He tried to steal a peek, leaning his head toward her. Unfortunately, Fuyuka reacted in turn, keeping whatever she was clinging to protected from view.

“I guess I’m not allowed to see?”

“No... Sorry.”

“Okay, I’ll just look the other way for now,” he said.

Can’t say I’m not interested, but hey... if she doesn’t want me to take a look, I’m not gonna push the issue and upset her.

Asahi turned away for a while until he heard, “It’s okay to look now.”

Asahi wheeled around and noticed that both of her hands were now empty. Fuyuka had placed whatever she’d been carrying back on the shelf.

Dunno what there is to hide from me in the sweets section, of all places. Maybe she just wanted to get a snack or something. I don’t get it—probably a girl thing.

“Are you here to buy ingredients for dinner?” Fuyuka—who had quickly returned to her normal demeanor—asked.

Asahi nodded. Since they were both already at the supermarket, they elected to do their shopping together.

“What would you like for today’s dinner?” he asked.

“I’ll leave it up to you to choose, if that’s all right.”

“Yeah, but, like... you always say that. Wouldn’t hurt to request something specific.”

“It’s difficult to decide when you put it that way,” she said, before coming to a stop as they passed the fish section. “The sashimi is being sold for cheap.”

“Oh wow, it really is. How about we make some hand-rolled sushi?”

“That sounds great. Wouldn’t it be more expensive than usual, though?”

“That’s true, but there’s no harm in splurging from time to time, right?”

“If you say so,” she said, grabbing the sashimi pack which had the discount sticker adhered to it. She placed it inside the shopping basket Asahi held.

“There’s no going back now.”

“No need to be so dramatic, Fuyuka.”

They gathered other ingredients, such as cucumber and dried gourd strips, and enjoyed pleasant conversation. They discussed what went best with the hand-rolled sushi, ruling out other fillings that they deemed too pricey.

Asahi was still tormented by mixed feelings. Their entire relationship was built on the pretext of him teaching her how to cook—a role a literal maid was more than capable of fulfilling. The issue weighed heavily on him, and his feet became heavier with each step. Still, he couldn’t afford to let Fuyuka get a whiff of the egoistic sentiment brewing inside.

“Do we have enough eggs in the fridge?” Fuyuka asked.

“We made soup yesterday, so we don’t have many left over.”

“I’ll go get some more, then,” she said, darting off to procure a carton.

Asahi allowed a single sigh to leak out after he watched her walk away.

*

After they returned home, the two indulged in idle chatter in the kitchen as they prepared the dish. Asahi was in charge of the fillings, whilst Fuyuka made the sushi rice.

Despite her struggles in the past, Fuyuka was now able to follow easy recipes without committing many mistakes. He felt confident leaving her to it, given how simple her task was. All she needed to do was season the rice, mix it, and steam it until the water evaporated.

Dinner preparations proceeded forward rather swimmingly as they maintained a lively conversation. After about 10 minutes, everything was complete.

The sushi rice sat right in the center of the table, with various other fillings surrounding it.

Asahi picked up the wooden serving spatula, lifted a scoop of rice onto the seaweed, then layered the fillings—namely sashimi—on top of it. He proceeded to fold up the outer layer of the seaweed and rolled it into a cone. Voilà! A serving of hand-rolled sushi was ready for consumption.

Asahi opened wide and tossed the sushi into his mouth. “It’s delicious.”

“How is the rice? Is it well-cooked?” she inquired.

“It’s perfect.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Fuyuka flashed a cheerful grin as she wrapped a piece of rolled omelet around the seaweed. She raised the sushi to her small mouth, and gave another tiny smile.

The two of them were having a blast, enjoying their little feast with each other’s company.

“Oh right—there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you, Asahi,” she abruptly said.

Asahi’s shoulders twitched in response. He could see her reluctance, so he was able to deduce what she was trying to get at.

“Is it about your maid coming back next week?”

“Yes,” she replied with a slight sigh.

“I get it. There isn’t much left for me to teach you anyways, so you could say it’s about time. Your maid can help you from now on...” he said, gradually growing more gloomy with each word.

Although he’d felt worried about his relationship with Fuyuka before, it had never been this bad. He understood that it was because their relationship had deepened. They’d started off as mere strangers, but now they were close friends.

“We’ve only got a few more days together, so hey—let’s make them count,” he added, feigning composure.

It’s not like I’ll never see her again, or anything like that. We’re still neighbors, and we’ll have lots of chances to talk at school. We’ll still be spending time together.

“I’m... not sure I follow,” she said, tilting her head in puzzlement.

“Aren’t we talking about how you’ll stop coming over because your maid is back?”

“I never said anything like that,” she objected, her voice a mixture of anger and sadness. She hung her head. “But if you really don’t want me around, then —”

“No no no,” he cut in. Asahi couldn’t see her expression, but her tone of voice was enough of an indication of how she felt. He—in a somewhat disjointed manner—laid his feelings bare. “I... I want us to go on like this for a long time. I have so much fun cooking, eating dinner, and chatting with you before you go back home each night. And I would love... nothing more than to keep that routine alive.”

She slowly lifted her head and locked eyes with Asahi. He noticed a blush beginning to creep across her face. “I feel the exact same, Asahi. I’d like to experience more days like this with you, too.”

Her words brought him great happiness. This time, he was the one to lower

his head and mumble. “Still, things won’t be the same once your maid returns.”

“You’re not wrong. Performing house chores flawlessly *is* her job, after all. She’s... the meddlesome type, too. Sort of like you are, if not more so. Still, that doesn’t mean she comes over to my place everyday.”

“I think I’ve heard you say that before.”

“Naturally, I’m the one who takes care of all the housework on her days off... Well, besides the cooking. She prepares food for me beforehand, haha. But I’m always alone on Saturdays, you know?”

There was a short pause afterward. Silence prevailed, save for the mechanical ticking of the clock. Asahi had to infer what Fuyuka meant. He mustered up all his courage and risked advancing a step forward.

“You should come over on the weekend, then. We can have a meal together, like always.”

Fortunately, Asahi’s proposal was answered in the form of a dazzling grin.

“I look forward to spending more time with you!” she exclaimed.

Asahi’s cheeks burnt red once again upon seeing Fuyuka’s innocent expression of happiness. He kept the blazing fire smoldering within him hidden and returned her smile instead.

Chapter Nine

Valentine's Day

Kaori Tachibana had returned to her duties of tending to Fuyuka, but that was not to say that Asahi had been taken out of the picture completely. They still met up on the weekends, prepared meals, and ate dinner together.

Certainly, the time they spent with each other—especially sitting at the same table—had decreased drastically, but Asahi was simply delighted to be with her.

Dinner's been feeling like it's been missing something these past few days. Suppose it's been a hot minute since I had it all alone.

Looking forward to every upcoming Saturday relieved him from any gloom or bitter loneliness he might've suffered.

The 14th of February rolled in before long, bringing with it a saccharine aroma which drifted across the classroom. The sugary scent—undoubtedly that of chocolate—caressed the nostrils of everyone present.

"Feels like Valentine's all right," Chiaki casually muttered, surveying his surroundings.

A peculiar atmosphere pervaded the school today. Classes had ended, but curiously enough, throngs of restless students lingered in the classroom.

As per Japanese norms, Valentine's day celebrations chiefly consisted of women gifting chocolates to men. Hence, the boys eagerly loitered around, anxious to hear their names called out by the girls. The girls, meanwhile, were busy gathering up the courage to do so.

"Sooo... Not gonna go home early this year?" Chiaki asked, cracking a wide grin.

"Guess not," Asahi replied.

"I see that you received tons of chocolate. Let your ol' pal Chiaki have a quick peek."

"I think you'll be disappointed—there's nothing but cheap obligatory

chocolate.”

“You sure about that? Maybe someone put in the effort and got you something fancy.” Chiaki argued, peeping at the contents of his friend’s paper bag.

Although, at a glance, he could discern that the majority of them were indeed obligatory chocolates—a customary gift given to coworkers, friends, and family out of appreciation—a few items inside made their presence known with their striking wrapping.

Another smirk appeared upon Chiaki’s lips. Contrary to the obligatory chocolate sold for a modest sum of change, the elaborately packaged ones were—from what he could tell, at least—handmade chocolates. Those were often exclusively presented to romantic interests, and often a vehicle for a girl to confess her feelings.

“Always knew this guy was popular with the ladies. Who got you those handmade ones?”

“They’re not what you think they are,” Asahi quickly—and firmly—denied, averting his eyes.

“Really now? Oh well, the day’s still young. You’ll get those soon enough.”

“It’s like, late afternoon, man. I doubt anything else is coming.”

And yet a new girl entered the classroom and called upon one of their classmates. The pair locked eyes, indulging in a special moment where the rest of the world faded into the background. This, predictably, invited envious and resentful glares from the onlookers.

The two lovebirds exited the classroom. Although nobody knew what would become of the pair, chances were high that a love confession was on the horizon.

That said, racking up chocolates didn’t necessarily guarantee a love confession—not when the culture surrounding the holiday also encouraged gifting confections to friends. In cases of close friendships, chocolates—typically expensive ones—were exchanged solely between girls.

Hell, there're a bunch of people who give chocolate to pretty much everyone... including me.

There were some things that could only be conveyed in words. The fact that Asahi didn't understand the meaning behind the chocolate he'd been given just highlighted the idea.

Sure, maybe I got some from people who have feelings for me, but that could also be all in my head.

As Asahi mused on the enigma of Valentine's Day, a certain girl who was dear to his heart leapt to mind. It kindled a faint expectation inside him. Despite his outwardly calm demeanor, Asahi quietly, but eagerly, waited for Fuyuka.

At that moment, the door to the classroom slammed open, gaining everyone's attention.

The petite girl sprinted with a spring in her step, heading straight for Asahi's general direction.

"Chii-pie!" Hinami yelled out.

"Heeey! Done handing out chocolate?"

"Sure am! Everyone was really happy!"

"That's my girl. Bet it was worth all that trouble making them, huh?"

"Yup! Oh, speaking of which..." Hinami plopped down on Chiaki's lap, then brought out a neatly wrapped pouch from her school bag. "Here you go, Chii-pie! Handmade chocolate prepared with *lots of love* just for you!"

"Let's gooo! Aww, thanks a bunch, Hina. I'm so happy!"

"Heh heh! Anything for you, boo!" she chuckled.

"The Obnoxious Couple" secluded themselves in their own little world for a bit, Chiaki enjoying Hinami's homemade chocolate and showering her with praise.

Despite the fact that both of them embodied a picture-perfect portrait of a happy couple, their classmates didn't seem very amused. Boys complained with ill-concealed contempt, while girls threw jealous glares at them.

“Right, I almost forgot! You’re one of my besties, Asahi, so I got you your very own chocolate!”

“Huh, thanks,” Asahi said.

“Check it out! Didn’t it turn out, like, *amazingly* great?”

“Honestly, it doesn’t look any different from the ones you see lining the shelves at a store. Wow.”

“I know, right?! You can sure as heck *bet* it’ll taste exactly like those too! We put in *loads* of time practicing how to make them and everything!”

“‘We’?” Asahi parroted.

“Umm... Err, well, y’know... ‘We’ like me and my mom! She walked me through the whole thing! Mhm!”

Asahi was suspicious, but he figured he wouldn’t get a satisfactory response even if he hounded her with questions. Instead, he chose to occupy himself by opening the pouch—noticeably inferior in all aspects to the special one Chiaki had received—she’d given him.

This is still a good gift either way, of course. It’s just like Hinami to put in a ton of effort for her friends, and it shows.

Asahi sampled a piece of chocolate, all too aware that his friend was watching him like a hawk. Its elegant, sweet taste rapidly spread across his tongue. “Yup, pretty tasty.”

“Yay! Got Chef Asahi’s seal of approval!” Hinami exclaimed.

She did little to suppress her joy, completely disregarding the fact Asahi was by no means a recognised authority on preparing chocolate whatsoever; he’d simply given her his honest thoughts. At any rate, watching Hinami beam and high-five Chiaki made Asahi smile too.

“Oh yeah, Hina—have you seen Himuro anywhere? Thought she’d be with you,” Chiaki asked while eating another piece of Hinami’s chocolate.

Asahi’s ears perked up upon hearing Fuyuka’s name.

“About that... she just kinda got up and left when the bell rang.”

“What? Like right away?” Asahi asked.

“Mhm. Said she had important stuff to attend to or something.”

“I see,” Asahi muttered, unable to stifle a heavy sigh.

He’d thought there had been a chance that he’d receive some chocolate from Fuyuka today, but that wasn’t happening if what Hinami said was true.

It’s not like Fuyuka has to give me some just ‘cause I’m closer to her than others, though I can’t say I’m not a bit disappointed...

“It’ll be fiiinee, Asahi! Don’t get depressed!” Hinami tried to cheer Asahi up.

“Who put you on moral support duty?”

“Baah, don’t be like that! Everything’s gonna be *fiiine*, okay? Trust me!”

Have no clue what she’s on about.

“You gotta listen to my Hina—she’s spittin’ straight facts. I’m sure it’ll all be all right,” Chiaki chimed in, lightly patting Asahi’s shoulder.

“Not you too...” Asahi, who was still completely in the dark, grumbled. He did his best to smile, the aftertaste of chocolate still lingering in his mouth.

*

After returning to his apartment a bit later than normal, the first thing Asahi busied himself with was laundry. After that, he cooked dinner by himself, ate it, and washed the dishes. Time passed without anything of importance to note. The gap between the curtains granted a glimpse into the darkness which wholly blanketed the sky outside.

“Welp, guess she’s not coming,” Asahi grumbled, collapsing onto his bed.

A part of him refused to let go of the faint glimmer of hope, though it proved increasingly difficult to justify entertaining that notion given the time. The possibility of Fuyuka coming over was virtually zero.

Never imagined I’d get so worked up over chocolate... Maybe it was narcissistic of me to think I was gonna get some just ‘cause we’ve gotten closer to each other. Man, what’s happening to me lately?

The thought left Asahi feeling somewhat embarrassed, causing him to bury his face deep into a pillow. He was just about to drift off to sleep when the sound of his intercom disturbed the tranquility of his room. He quickly snapped out of the world of dreams and back to reality.

“There’s no way...” he mumbled to himself, trying to calm his pounding heart before reaching the front door.

The possible risks of opening his door to an unexpected visitor in the later hours of the evening didn’t even cross his mind—he opened it immediately. The graceful figure of a girl, a small paper bag in her hands, waited on the other side.

“Good evening,” Fuyuka greeted.

“Hey...” he nervously replied, unable to offer the most basic of greetings.

His heart began to once again beat heavily at the sight of Fuyuka silhouetted in the moonlight. He contemplated whether it was a by-product of the special holiday, or whether it was something else entirely.

“Sorry to disturb you at this hour but, um, I was wondering if you had a second?”

“Sure, sure. Come in, it’s pretty cold out there.”

“Th-There’s no need, I won’t take much of your time—”

“And risk having you catch another cold? Don’t think so.”

“If you insist...” she relented. The door closed behind her with a soft thud, and a moment of silence ensued. “Umm, I...”

Fuyuka’s delicate body swayed from side to side. She was fidgety and avoided Asahi’s eyes.

As for Asahi, he focused on the polka-dotted paper bag.

Fuyuka timidly opened her mouth. Her clear voice wavered a little as she asked, “Do you know what day it is today, Asahi?”

“It’s Valentine’s day.”

“Indeed. That’s why I got this for you,” she offered him the bag, her head

hung bashfully to hide her facial expression.

“You’re giving this to me?”

“Yes. Think of it as a token of gratitude—for everything you’ve done for me.”

“This is the chocolate you give to your friends and stuff, right?”

“Um... yes, I guess so. I’m not really sure.”

How can you be unsure about chocolate? Whatever, I guess.

“Thank you Fuyuka, seriously. I’m really happy.” Words of sincere appreciation escaped his lips, accompanied by a gentle smile. He was thrilled that he’d received chocolate from Fuyuka. “Can I have some?”

“Wh-What? Right now, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

Fuyuka paused before nodding, and Asahi suppressed the masculine urge to tear the packaging open. He tried his utmost to tenderly unwind the wrapping, which revealed a few spherical pieces of chocolate truffles inside. The confections were coated with sprinkled powdered sugar, evocative of fine snow.

“I feel like they came out nicely, so please help yourself to one,” Fuyuka—who’d finally managed to make eye contact with him—said.

Her almost translucent skin was rose-tinged, and Asahi, who seemed to be mesmerized by her, somehow managed to turn his gaze away.

He placed one of the chocolates in his mouth, ensuring to savor its taste whilst chewing on the small piece of confectionery bliss.

“This is so good.” Asahi relayed his relatively simple impressions. It wasn’t that he couldn’t come up with anything else to say, but rather, his thoughts had condensed to complete concision after a profound amount of consideration.

Fuyuka’s anxious expression softened, proof that his spartan response had gotten through to her.

“I’m kinda surprised, though. I never taught you how to make sweets and all,” he added.

“I was lucky to have Aoba’s help.”

“Really?”

“Yes. She asked me if I’d like to make chocolate together with her, and I agreed.”

It sounded as though she had put a lot of work into preparing for this day. Suddenly, Hinami’s weird evasiveness earlier that day also clicked into place.

“Remember when we met at the supermarket a little while ago? I was buying some chocolate bars for reference. I didn’t expect to run into you.”

“So that’s why you were acting weird.”

“I really wanted to keep it a surprise, if I could,” Fuyuka said with a playful smile.

Heh, guess she got me then.

“Did you work on these all day?”

“I did... Um, how did you know?”

“Just a lucky guess. I heard you went home early today.”

“I thought I’d... try my absolute best to make them nice for you,” she said, shyly casting her eyes down.

Her statement made Asahi consider whether someone would put this much work into chocolate for someone they considered just a friend.

That might just be how Fuyuka is, though. Her manner of speech and overall disposition reflected her virtuous personality, so it would make sense. *She said this chocolate was her way of thanking me for everything I’ve done for her, and—if memory serves—she bought me a Christmas present for a similar reason. I dunno what it is I’ve given to her to deserve all this gratitude, but it seems really important to her.*

“These came out well thanks to your advice, too,” she said.

“My advice?”

“You don’t remember? It was the first piece of advice you ever gave me.”

Asahi had taught her a lot about cooking by this point, so he couldn't readily summon the first piece of advice he'd ever given her. He could name a number of key tips, but Asahi couldn't say with certainty what Fuyuka was referring to... until a distinct string of words sprang to mind:

"Cooking isn't all about how good it tastes in the end. It's about how much love you put into it."

Asahi had a strong hunch that the first pointer he ever gave to her was something along those lines. He remembered how he'd expanded upon it—that *love* was primarily the amount of *care* put into the dish, and it was all in appreciation of whoever you were cooking for. He remembered that he'd said something about love being the best secret ingredient. It was something obvious, yet hard, to grasp on to.

She couldn't mean...? Asahi had to remind himself that this was just friend chocolate to banish any absurd delusions. "Guess you really went back to basics, huh?"

"I did."

"And you got some wonderful chocolate as a result. Good job," Asahi said with a grin.

Fuyuka reciprocated with a cheerful smile of her own. "You should teach me how to make sweets sometime."

And with that, she took her leave and disappeared behind the door.

"Thank you," Asahi mouthed.

As he mulled over whether he'd managed to properly convey his gratitude, a silvery streak of moonlight crept through the window and illuminated the entryway, which was adorned with three shining roses.

Chapter Ten

Study Meet

Valentine's Day came and went, ushering along newly formed couples.

There was a cozy, romantic ambience that enveloped the whole school. The new love birds wouldn't be able to enjoy that for too long, however, as spring break loomed on the horizon. That meant that exams were rapidly approaching.

A growing number of students began to populate the library and empty classes with each passing day, and it had become a regular occurrence to spot them gathering at family restaurants near the school.

Asahi, as a matter of course, was diligently attending to his studies, reviewing past lessons and preparing for future ones. He resolved to put exceptional effort into studying on weekends, though this was primarily due to the fact that he was secretly looking forward to Fuyuka's visits.

"Heyooo! We're here in Asahi's crib, about to kick off *the* fiiirst..."

"...Study meet to prepare for the upcoming exams!"

"Let's gooo!"

"The Obnoxious Couple" clamored, disturbing the peace of the normally silent apartment. Their enthusiastic remarks reverberated throughout the room until a swift pair of whacks silenced them.

"You guys are clowns." Asahi, the bringer of punishment, rebuked them.

"I-I'm gonna call child protective services!"

"Why'd you hit me harder than her, dude?!"

Hinami and Chiaki protested, teary-eyed, and massaged their heads.

Textbooks, notebooks, mechanical pencils, erasers, and other such items lay scattered in front of them on the table.

"Yeah, yeah, sorry I had to cut the fun short," Asahi grumbled. "Hey, remind me again who came crying for help because they were about to flunk these

exams? Gee, I can't seem to remember..."

"Me..."

"Me too..."

"That's what I thought. You two better start taking this seriously."

The rowdy couple, having suddenly become conscious of what a catastrophe failing the final exams of their first year of high school would be, turned to Asahi for assistance. He'd decided to organize a study group at his place.

There's no point in the whole thing if you don't give this your all, guys.

This good-natured aspect of Asahi's personality, the one that made him want to help those in need regardless of other circumstances, made him perfectly suited to become the pair's tutor.

"Oh, be nice to them, Asahi," a calm-sounding voice—a complete contrast to Asahi's rigid disposition—chided him. "Some people can't focus past a certain point when they're tired."

"Fine... if you say so, Fuyuka." Asahi reluctantly disengaged his hardass mode. When he felt an impertinent gaze fall on him, however, he quickly snapped, "You! What's so funny? You want to get up and share with the class?!"

"Eek! Asahi's being scawy, Fuyu-Fuyu!" Hinami yelped, opening her arms wide to seek pity from her friend.

"H-Hey! Don't cling onto me please!" Fuyuka held Himari at bay.

Chiaki, observing the whole ordeal from his chair, laughed. "Anyway, I'm glad you could make it, Himuro."

"Oh, it's nothing. I was planning to do some studying myself anyway."

"I'm glad you're here too, Fuyu-Fuyu!"

"With you here, passing these exams is gonna be smoooth sailing," Chiaki said.

No clue where those two get their confidence from. It just comes down to the amount of work they put in, which is why I want them to study hard.

"The Obnoxious Couple" seemed to be relatively motivated—they'd even

brought a plethora of textbooks and resources along to aid them. Fuyuka had been kind enough to join them for the study meet, as well.

“You two better not cause any trouble for Fuyuka, got it?” Asahi warned.

“Aye, Aye, Captain,” the couple responded in unison.

The finals were practically knocking on the door. With only one week until the dreaded date, there was no time to dawdle. Their first study meet began with the four of them gathered around one table. They adopted a one-on-one tutoring structure; Fuyuka handled Hinami, while Asahi worked with Chiaki.

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“I’m tirrrrrreeeeed!” Hinami complained loudly.

“Same. Any more and I think I’ll keel over...” Chiaki agreed.

Asahi eyed the clock on the wall, ignoring their whining, and noted it was already evening. Despite squeezing in an adequate amount of breaks into their schedule, “The Obnoxious Couple” weren’t used to investing so much time into their studies. Their ability to concentrate seemed to have reached its limit.

The couple, despite appearances, weren’t stupid. In fact, they were more than capable of passing these tests. That, combined with Asahi and Fuyuka’s effective tutoring, had greatly helped their comprehension of the exam material. They had even done well with a short quiz Asahi had created for them; they’d gotten over 80 percent of the questions correctly.

Looks like we won’t see any failures if we keep this up, but they’ve run out of steam. Obviously, I can’t force them to study any more. Whatever they decide to do, it’s on them. All I can do is remind them.

“Hmm, guess it’s about time for dinner, then,” Asahi declared.

The four of them had settled on having dinner together beforehand. He got up and made his way to the kitchen.

“Woohoo!” the couple exclaimed.

“I’ll help, Asahi,” Fuyuka offered.

“I’d appreciate that, thanks. Could you get out the utensils we’re gonna need?

Oh, and it'd be great if you could start peeling the vegetables."

"Got it." With that brisk reply, Fuyuka got to work. "It's only been a few days, but... it feels like it's been forever since we were in the same kitchen like this."

"True."

"Did you miss it?" Fuyuka suddenly asked, surprising Asahi.

"I guess so. We were together pretty much constantly until recently, after all."

"I feel the same way," she said with a chuckle, tying the apron behind her back.

"Better not mess up in front of those two, okay?"

Asahi had immediately relapsed back into his bad habit of teasing Fuyuka to hide his embarrassment.

"I-I'll be fine, thank you very much! I've put in a lot of work to—Ah!" She lost her footing and grabbed onto Asahi's shoulder for support.

"You okay?" Asahi asked, and she nodded in reply. "Be more careful."

She nodded a second time without uttering a word. Instead, she hung her scarlet-tinged face down. Asahi couldn't determine if she was blushing because she was ashamed of the blunder she'd committed in front of him, or if it was something else entirely.

Whatever the case was, Asahi composed himself by inhaling deeply. His own blush dissipated, and he stole a quick peek into the living room. He heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank god—looks like those two weren't paying attention."

"You said it... If Aoba had seen what just happened, I don't think she would've ever let us live it down."

"Yeah, and I'm sure Chiaki would've loved to jump on the bandwagon. You know, with that stupid grin of his and all."

Realizing that they'd gotten off scot-free lightened the awkward mood inside the kitchen.

"All right, let's get this show on the road," Asahi declared. He found he was more in the zone than usual, and immersed himself in cooking dinner—

Hamburg steak with cheese.

“Commander Hinami, Ma’am! It would appear that Himuro has a comprehensive grasp over the Kagami kitchen sector according to local intelligence!” Chiaki barked out faux military speak to his girlfriend.

“Are you positive, Private? That information seems to lack credibility, if I do say so myself.”

“Ma’am, we’ve also spotted her deploying an apron—believed to be the same one Asahi gave her on her birthday!”

“Well I’ll be damned, ladies! It looks like we’ve got ourselves a pair of love birds in our sights.”

“Affirmative! They’re getting along like a house on fire, Ma’am!”

“Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if we see them hug or someth—Yikes! My cover was nearly blown by Asahi surveillance! Stay frosty, Private!”

Asahi had looked their way.

After a pause, Chiaki suggested, “Let’s just keep a lookout and see how things go.”

“Mhm! Maybe we could even occasionally give them a *teeny* tiny nudge!”

*

The final exams concluded without a hitch.

After they’d glided through the marking period—practically a holiday, for all intents and purposes—the much-anticipated day had finally arrived; the students’ results would be posted. The school year was completed, and only the closing and graduation ceremonies remained. That meant that only a few days separated the students from the almost two-week-long spring break.

“Man, this year went by so fast! So much happened,” Chiaki said, reminiscing.

“All first year students say that,” Asahi said.

“An ice cold reply. Classic Asahi.”

“I mean, well... I guess it was significant for me, too.”

Although classes had finished, the classroom was still bustling with energy.

The fact that this was the final time Asahi would be with this specific group of people gave him a somewhat melancholic feeling. It wasn't so bad, though. It wasn't a final goodbye for them. If the students remained in this school, he'd probably bump into them again at some point in the next two years.

"Anyway. How did you do on the exams?"

Chiaki raised an eyebrow. "You really wanna know?"

"Lemme think... Um, yes? I spent a lot of time tutoring you. Obviously I'd want to know your results."

"I hear you man, but I dunnooo... it's kinda... *personal* info, you feel me?"

Asahi ignored his friend's attempts to stall by reaching over and deftly snatching his report card from his hands. While his grades would not be considered ideal, simply average, Chiaki had managed to pass all subjects.

"Pretty awesome, right?"

"Awesomely *average*."

"The truth hurts sometimes, Asahi... You cruel, cruel man..." Chiaki muttered dejectedly.

"Well, to be fair, I guess you gave it your best shot."

"I know, right?! I totally did!" Chiaki was suddenly full of energy again.

"We'll get that brain of yours checked one day, Chiaki."

Nonetheless, his friend had successfully avoided the worst-case scenario and wouldn't have to take any supplementary courses.

"I spy with my little eye... Chii-pie! Oh, Asahi's here too! Hey!" a jovial voice called out from behind the two boys, stealing their attention.

They turned to find Hinami waving her hand and entering the classroom. Fuyuka tagged behind her.

"Check this bad boy out, Asahi!"

"Whoa, nice. All that studying paid off in the end," Asahi said.

“Yup, yup, all thanks to you and Fuyu-Fuyu! I owe you two big time!”

The scores printed on Hinami’s report card—which she’d proudly held up for everyone to see—showed that she’d done pretty uniformly in all the tests.

Meanwhile, Fuyuka had secured her reign as top of her class. Asahi had earned a respectable score and secured a position in the higher echelons. All the members who’d partaken in the study meet could now enjoy spring break without any worries.

“How about we use this holiday to go somewhere? Just the four of us,” Asahi suggested.

Hinami seemed genuinely surprised. “Whoa, it’s rare that Asahi wants to do stuff!”

“What? I’m not allowed to or something?”

“No, no, I didn’t say that at all. In fact, I’m all for it! We were just about to invite you guys out anyway,” Hinami said, drawing out four colorful tickets from her wallet. “I happened to get my hands on some tickets for the amusement park!”

“Where did you even get those from?” Asahi asked.

“My mom won ’em at some lottery when she was out shopping and gave ’em to me!” she puffed her chest with pride despite the fact that she’d done nothing at all. Asahi decided to bite his tongue, however. “So, who’s free on Saturday? Raise your hands!”

“Me, me, me!” Chiaki yelled.

“I guess I’m free that day...”

“I should be fine to come...” Fuyuka answered with a furtive glint in her eyes.

“Then let’s go have a blast at the amusement park!” Hinami exclaimed with a wide smile.

And just like that, everyone was on board.

“It’s been such a long time since I’ve been to an amusement park,” Fuyuka said to herself, staring at the tickets.

“All the more reason to go and enjoy yourself, girl!” Hinami replied, her eyes bright.

“How about we get there real early so we can enjoy the whole day?” Chiaki suggested.

“Hell yeah! You know I’m down for all-day fun!”

The couple—already determined that they were going to enjoy their time at the amusement park to the fullest—promptly began arranging an agenda for the upcoming weekend. They discussed which rides they would go on first, which restaurant to visit for lunch, and which souvenirs to get. They seemed particularly intrigued by the animal-ear headbands modeled after the park’s mascots. The mouse and bear ones seemed to be the most popular.

“How about we all wear matching headbands?” Hinami suggested in an excited tone.

“Not happening,” Asahi refused.

“But *why*?! They’re like, super cute!”

“That’s not really the problem here.”

“What is it, then?!”

“I’d be too embarrassed.”

The couple smirked.

“Asahi, my man, come here for a minute,” Chiaki said. He leaned in to whisper to his friend.

“God, what now?”

“You can be honest with me, buddy—aren’t you at least *a little* interested in seeing Himuro with cat ears?”

Asahi paused before muttering, “No.”

“I saw you think about it for a second there.”

“Shut up and go back to talking to your girlfriend.”

Asahi just so happened to lock eyes with Fuyuka at that exact moment, which

caused images of her in cute cat ears to pop up. He quickly banished those thoughts with a shake of his head. “Wish Chiaki would keep his mouth closed sometimes...” he grumbled.

“What’s wrong?” Fuyuka asked.

“Just Chiaki being an idiot.”

“You see, Himuro, I was asking my good ol’ pal Asahi here if he was interested in seeing you with cat ea—arrrmgh!”

Asahi leapt over and covered Chiaki’s mouth with his hands. “Not another word. Am I clear?”

“Cryshtal,” came Chiaki’s muffled reply.

Hinami and Fuyuka both laughed, then the four of them resumed their friendly conversation. They were all smiles as they laid out their plans for the big day.

Chapter Eleven

The Amusement Park

The crowds, chiefly consisting of families and couples, poured through the grand entrance of the amusement park. Amongst the throng stood an energetic girl who pointed her right arm toward the sky and declared, “You guys better be ready, ’cause we’re gonna go beast mode all day today!”

“Let’s gooo!” Chiaki yelled out, matching his girlfriend’s enthusiasm.

The display garnered the attention of some other visitors, but the couple didn’t seem particularly bothered by it.

“C’mon, you two, let’s see some spirit!”

“Yaaaah, I think I’m gonna pass on screaming in public—it’s kinda embarrassing for me. I’m sure Fuyuka would agree, right?” Asahi retorted.

“L-Let’s... gooo...” Fuyuka, who was standing beside Asahi, cheered quietly and sheepishly raised her fist into the air. The motion shook her long ebony hair and brushed it to the side, granting the group a glimpse of her faintly blushing ears.

Hinami beamed. “Omigawd, Fuyu-Fuyu! That was super adorable!”

“Yup, now *there’s* someone who knows how to have a good time!”

“Didn’t think you’d succumb to peer pressure this easily...” Asahi mumbled. He wondered why Fuyuka had pushed herself to keep up with the couple’s rowdy behavior, but something else also weighed on his mind. “I see you’re wearing the earrings I got you.”

“Yes. I figured I’d put them on since we’re going out. I really like them.”

“I’m happy to hear that.”

“I thought you hadn’t noticed them...”

“I just kinda... haven’t been able to find the right time to mention it,” Asahi replied.

In truth, the earrings had gained his attention since he'd met her in front of their apartment complex, but—for one reason or another—he hadn't been able to make even the most casual of remarks about them until now. Upon some reflection, he realized it was possible that the reason Fuyuka had looked somewhat sullen on the train journey was that she'd mistakenly thought he hadn't noticed the earrings.

"I don't want to lose them, so I'm going to put them away when we're on any of the rides," Fuyuka said.

"You could always leave them with me, if you're that worried," Asahi offered.

"Thank you, but it's okay—I brought a case to put them in."

"Smart."

Hinami, Chiaki, and Fuyuka were brimming with excitement. The three chatted cheerfully as they headed for the ride they'd decided to try out first. Asahi, in spite of his indifferent tone, felt quite similar.

"Man, it's been a while since we've been at an amusement park," he remarked.

He remembered his last visit almost a year and a half ago, back when he'd still been a third year in middle school.

He'd been enjoying his summer break in the comfort of his air-conditioned room when Chiaki had dragged him out for a trip to the amusement park. A handful of Chiaki's other friends had also accompanied them. For someone who preferred to seclude himself indoors, the sizzling heat of the summer never did much for Asahi. That said, the sense of satisfaction he'd experienced on his way home after a long day of playing around had been worth it, in the end.

Chiaki hasn't changed much. He's still got that same annoying smirk. Suppose the only thing that's different is that he got himself a girlfriend, he mused as he looked at the joyous duo.

Something had changed for Asahi, too—the friends he'd been with in the previous outing had been replaced by a charming girl.

She scrutinized the attractions with an excited glint in her eyes, then confided

to the group that she hadn't been to an amusement park since she was in elementary school.

"So it's gonna be your first time on a roller coaster, huh?" Asahi asked.

"Yes, I didn't meet the height requirements last time."

"Just let us know if it gets too much for you to handle, okay? These two are gonna make us go on all the crazy rides, just so you know."

"I appreciate the concern, but I'm worried about you more than anything."

"Me? Why?"

"Your mother told me you weren't exactly good with roller coasters."

"Right, of course she would..." he grumbled.

Asahi recalled childhood memories, back when he was too short to be permitted on the bigger rides. He *had* been let onto a roller coaster, albeit one designed for children. Even then, Asahi had struggled with that one.

But that was AGES ago. Even real roller coasters don't bother me anymore—hell, I've grown to enjoy the scary ones. And how'd this come up between Fuyuka and my mom?! I'd really like to know!

He resolved to interrogate his mother about it later. For the time being, he devoted his attention toward the calamitous sounds of mechanical, rattling roars and adrenaline-induced screams.

"Just so you guys know, these rides are no big deal. I dunno what my mom told you, but that's all in the past now," he stated confidently.

"Which makes me the only person here nervous about the whole thing..." Fuyuka muttered in a defeated tone.

"Wanna hear something cool? They say this one we're about to ride is the fastest in Japan."

"How is that cool in any way?!" Fuyuka yelled.

"What? You're not more excited now?"

"No, I'm just more scared."

Hinami noticed Fuyuka's discomfort and jumped to her defense instantly. "Hey! Whadayya think you're doing, Asahi? Stop bullying our poor angel!"

"I don't wanna hear that from the person who scheduled us riding this thing *three times in a row*. I'd say *you're* the real bully here, if anything."

"Ah, um, well... I've got a backup plan in case Fuyu-Fuyu doesn't like it!"

"Do tell."

"Don't think I heard anything about this either, Hina," Chiaki chimed in.

"I-It's, uh, a secret! Yeah! So you guys just relax and stay tuned!"

Hinami's stuttering just made Asahi wish they'd planned the trip better. Despite his claims that he had no trouble with big rides anymore, he'd never ridden them multiple times in succession. He had his suspicions that Chiaki was the same, to say nothing of Fuyuka, who was cowering next to him.

"It's gonna be great, guys! I positively guarantee it!" Hinami tried to reassure them.

The rest of the group—the realization dawning on them that they'd roped themselves into going on a number of thrill rides multiple times in a row—wore strained smiles as they arrived in front of the first roller coaster of the day.

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"I didn't realize amusement parks involved so much waiting around," Fuyuka noted as she scanned her surroundings.

The rest of the group nodded in agreement.

"Uh-huh. The place isn't even really packed, either," Chiaki said.

"Mhmm, you should come see the amount of people that line up at noon!" Hinami added.

Long lines, something Chiaki and Hinami were used to, were a new experience for Fuyuka. She marveled at the lengthy queues.

"Let us know if you get tired standing up in line, okay? There should be some benches around here you can rest on," Asahi said.

"Thank you, but I think I'll be fine for a while!" Fuyuka said confidently.

“Good to know.”

It wasn't unusual to spend the majority of one's time waiting to get on rides in popular theme parks. Many places offered a line-skipping pass for visitors who wished to circumvent the lines. Unfortunately for them, such a perk wasn't offered by the place they were at.

Generally, lengthy stretches of waiting around caused any excitement for a given ride to die away. This *would've* been a valid concern for the group, if Chiaki and Hinami weren't there.

“Guys, guys, how about we do something fun? Who's up for a word association game?” Hinami proposed.

“Great idea, babe! Aight, Hina, you give us the first word and we'll go clockwise.”

Asahi and Chiaki smiled, but Fuyuka appeared puzzled.

“I'm sorry, but what's a 'word association game'?” she asked, utterly clueless.

“You've never heard of it?” Hinami replied.

“I'm afraid not.”

The game was rather simple: one player started with a word, and the next was required to say the first word that sprang to mind after hearing the previous one.

The rules were straightforward, and Fuyuka grasped them effortlessly. With that, the group began.

Hinami started. “Okay, the first word is... ‘yellow’!”

The game proceeded swimmingly as Hinami, Chiaki, Fuyuka, and Asahi—in that order—sprang to answer without hesitation.

“Lemon.”

“Sour.”

“Pickled plums.”

Their vocabulary gradually became more and more complex the longer the session went on, and the words employed grew trickier to associate with

another word, elevating the difficulty. This was the charm of the word association game, and the group must've grasped this as they played repeatedly. There were no signs of stopping.

"Last word was 'actor,' right? Hmm... oh, got it: 'handsome'!" Chiaki took a second to come up with his word.

It was Fuyuka's turn next.

"Handsome, handsome..." she repeated to herself and paused briefly. What word could she possibly have been thinking of as the time limit for her reply drew ever closer? Eventually, she clapped her hands and exclaimed eagerly, "Asahi!"

"What?!" Asahi cried, taken aback.

"Aaand Asahi's lost!" Chiaki proclaimed with a grin.

"Now you've gotta face the loser's penalty, haha!" Hinami, like her boyfriend, taunted Asahi and smirked.

"Hold on a sec, when did anyone say anything about a penalty?" Asahi protested against Hinami's arbitrary rule change, then glanced at Fuyuka. "Besides, Fuyuka's the loser, not me."

"Wha—but how so?"

"What? You're trying to tell me *I'm* the first thing that popped to mind when you heard 'handsome'? I don't see it at all."

"Why not? I think you're very handsome, personally!" Fuyuka stated firmly.

"Oh yeah? If that's how you wanna play, I'm gonna answer with 'Fuyuka' the next time the word 'cute' comes round."

"Why would you? The rules of the game say that the words need to have an explicit connection."

"I'll have you know there's a very clear connection between those two words for me."

Their back-and-forth lasted a considerable amount of time as both sides refused to concede to the other. This made for a great show for the couple who

formed their audience.

“Damn, they don’t need us to give ’em a push at all, do they?”

“Hah, you said it, Chii-pie. They should totally just start dating already.”

The couple exchanged thoughts on Asahi and Fuyuka’s relationship; frustrated by the other pair’s lack of initiative. Regardless, their humorous dispute proved to be great entertainment and made the wait in line feel much shorter than it really was.

*

“Asahi, my man... You still breathing over there?” Chiaki asked.

“Worry about yourself, dude. You ain’t looking too hot either...” Asahi groaned in response.

Common sense would dictate that a schedule packed with high-octane rides—three consecutive trips on a roller coaster, a round on a free-fall ride, a quick lunch break, a round on the swing carousel, another visit to the free-fall ride, and, finally, another go at the roller coaster—would suffer from motion sickness.

Although that was very much the case for Chiaki and Asahi, it appeared that such trivial human ailments simply didn’t apply to Hinami.

The boys had successfully talked a zealous Hinami out of any more runs on the rollercoaster for the time being. They two recovered on a bench, their worn-out, defeated auras seemingly completely out of place at an amusement park. They’d anticipated something like this happening, but they’d never imagined it would be as extreme as *this*.

“Your girl’s just built different. She isn’t even fazed,” Asahi noted.

“And she hasn’t even run outta steam yet. Never expected that the *men* of the group’d be the ones to throw in the towe—*blech!*”

“Oh god, don’t even *think* about throwing up here.”

“Just let it happen. We just mainlined like 50 roller coaster rides.”

“The world doesn’t need to see whatever’s happening inside your stomach, so

you'd better keep it in there."

Hinami's not about to let us live this down, either. She just had to rub it in and call us "pathetic." It's like, hey, you're the weirdo with too much energy to spare here.

But what was perhaps most unexpected of all—given that it had been her first experience on thrill rides—was the innocent smile that had adorned Fuyuka's face during the rides.

I remember hearing this one theory somewhere that women can handle those kinda rides better because of how they're configured biologically, or something... Well, if it's true, we got to witness it firsthand today.

Asahi and Chiaki, who were drained both mentally and physically, wore grave expressions as they stared down at the ground.

"Heeey! Sorry to keep you guys waiting! Got you some drinks." Hinami approached and handed Chiaki a sports drink.

"Sweet, thanks. You're a lifesaver." Chiaki thanked her, then proceeded to down his drink in one go.

"Here's yours, Asahi," Fuyuka said, passing Asahi a bottle of mineral water.

"Thanks," Asahi replied before chugging some water. A reinvigorating sensation flowed through his body and soul. "Ah, that was refreshing. I needed that."

"I'm glad I could help."

I'm not ready for another trip through hell, but I should be able to get in another ride or two. I'd prefer something less intense though...

"Okaaaay! Now that you two wimps are back on your feet again, it's time we hit the next ride!"

"Do you seriously not get bored of riding on the same stuff over and over?" Asahi asked.

"Nope! Plus, the next one's something we haven't tried yet!"

"Huh... You sure about that one, Hina? I think we've been on every big ride

this park has.”

“I think Chiaki is right,” Fuyuka added.

Hinami simply smiled at her friend’s perplexed expressions. Although they weren’t sure what she was planning, they knew she was up to no good.

“You could say I saved the best to last! Just follow me, guys!” Hinami announced with unbridled enthusiasm, hardly able to contain herself.

Despite her bright smile, the rest of the group felt a dark cloud of unease brewing in their hearts. Unfortunately, she didn’t allow any time for objection. The three eventually gave in and followed along.

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*

Hinami, her steps bouncy and energetic, led the group to an awfully sinister location—a long-abandoned hospital, from what Asahi could tell. Suffice to say, it was by no stretch of the imagination a real hospital; it was just another attraction at the park. Its exterior, however, was so meticulously ominous, that—coupled with the chilly temperatures outside—presented a particularly haunting and ghastly atmosphere.

“So *this* is the attraction you were hyping up,” Chiaki said.

“Uh-huh! What’s the first thing that comes to mind when I say ‘Spring Outing’? Going to a haunted house, obvs! Hah!”

“That’s summer, moron,” Asahi quipped.

This specific attraction was meant to be enjoyed in pairs. Given how dark the interior of the hospital was, the visitors were equipped with flashlights. The attraction included emergency exits throughout in case the experience proved too extreme for some visitors.

The group of four were briefed on the fictitious background of the hospital by a lady wearing a white gown in the building’s reception. Before she could finish explaining some safety procedures, however, Chiaki and Hinami had already vanished. Fuyuka and Asahi were alone together, and she shrunk behind him.

“Asahi, where’s the emergency exit?” Fuyuka asked desperately.

“C’mon now, we’re literally two steps into the place.”

“I know, but there’s going to be something scary right around the corner!”

“You’re being paranoid. It’ll be fine—they won’t try to freak you out from the very start.”

“B-But what if there *was* a monster there? What would we do then?!”

“Umm... probably nothing, I guess? And even if there *was* something there, they’re not *actually* gonna hurt you or anything.”

“That isn’t the issue here!” Fuyuka cried.

Their quibble lasted a few minutes. The obstinate tone she assumed was quite cute, or so Asahi thought. She refused to advance further in.

If memory serves, she’s not great with horror, Asahi thought to himself as he recalled her fear when he’d made a joke about a ghost hovering behind her. He would be forgiven for assuming that one of the most intelligent people in their school would be inclined to dismiss all things supernatural, but her terror evidently overshadowed her reason. *Guess it doesn’t matter to her that she knows it’s all make-believe. She’s terrified right now.*

“Can you just give me a second to mentally prepare myself for this?” she asked.

“Sure, take your time. Actually, why don’t we just call it quits? Wanna go back to the entrance?”

“No... I want to go through the first stage, at the very least... if I can.”

Fuyuka mustered every ounce of her courage. Unfortunately, other groups of visitors had begun to form behind them, it was high time for the pair to proceed past the starting point.

Is there nothing I can do for her?

He recalled childhood memories, back when he still wasn’t permitted on roller coasters. His father had taken him to a haunted house instead, and he vividly recalled clutching onto Kazuaki’s back.

“What if you held onto my back, Fuyuka?”

“Wha...?”

“Not sure if it’ll be much help, but it’s probably better than nothing.”

Having someone immediately near her, Asahi figured, would provide emotional reassurance at the cost of slightly impairing his walking speed. It was a sacrifice Asahi was willing to make.

“Thank you,” she murmured and grabbed onto his shirt from behind.

“Feeling any better? Think you can keep going?”

“Yes, I’ve calmed down a bit. I think I can do this.”

“Nice. Hang on tight, okay?” Asahi said.

Fuyuka’s only response was a small squeeze that he felt on his back.

Asahi used the flashlight they had been given to illuminate the area in front of them, and they slowly forged ahead.

He made an effort to look behind him and check on Fuyuka from time to time; she was still barely managing to keep her eyes open.

Well, I guess that’s still an improvement.

“Seems like nothing’s happening so far,” Asahi reported.

“I hope it stays that way.”

“You’d be surprised how many places actually go for that ambient buildup, only for nothing to happen in the end.”

Then again, it wouldn’t be a haunted house if there wasn’t a jumpscare or two thrown in at some point. Giving visitors a false sense of security before scaring the living crap out of them is their bread and butter.

Asahi, however, elected to withhold that piece of information from Fuyuka.

Both of them walked down the long corridor. They turned the first corner, the very spot Fuyuka, had been wary of when—

“Aaaarrghhhh!”

A threatening roar rang out, followed by a man—clad in a bloody surgical suit—who sprang out and began to approach them at great speed.

“Eeeeeek!” Fuyuka shrieked cutely, which rang throughout the darkened hospital.

“Fuyuka, hey! You’re gonna tear my shirt...”

“No, no! A monster! Get away from me! Go away!”



“Okay, not getting through to you then,” he said. Fuyuka had all but regressed back to a young girl. She sealed her eyes shut and quivered in fear. She embraced Asahi from behind, sinking her face into his back and shutting her eyes tight in an attempt to ignore the outside world. Asahi had no choice but to drag her along himself.

*

As the hoarse, muffled groans grew quieter and quieter behind them, Asahi was finally able to make it to the designated safe zone within the attraction, albeit not without some trouble.

“There we go. Nobody should come for us here.”

Fuyuka sobbed, her clasp white-knuckled around Asahi. The shallow breaths she drew in and out filled the dark room with noise. That, combined with Fuyuka’s soft touch on his back, made Asahi feel almost overstimulated in an already intense situation.

“Well, this is far from ideal.”

The tenacity with which she held onto Asahi rendered him unable to move properly, yet he couldn’t find it in his heart to peel her off of him. He waited patiently for the right opportunity to speak.

“Cooled down a bit?”

Fuyuka nodded, mute.

“Think you can walk on your own now?”

She shook her head.

“You wanna quit? We can get out now if you want.” he asked, concerned. Fuyuka nodded quickly, which caused Asahi to smile. “All right then, let’s go. You can keep holding onto me if you want.”

Driven by Asahi’s encouragement, Fuyuka followed along, her head drooped down low. This helpless side of her—like that of a scared child—was something that Asahi hadn’t seen before.

The impression was only solidified when she quietly muttered, “Just so you

know... I'm not afraid of monsters."

"Mhm. I don't doubt it," Asahi teased, cracking a smile.

*

"Park's gonna close soon. I figure we can get one more ride in," Chiaki said while staring at a clock.

The sun had already begun to near the horizon, dyeing the sky orange. The distinction between day and night always proved dubious between the end of winter and the start of spring. The marvelous sunset mixed shades of indigo, violet, and sienna. It would soon all be replaced by the inky black of night.

"No more, please."

"Please."

Asahi and Fuyuka were of one mind as the temperature continued to drop around them. The fatigue of the day had taken a toll on them, both mentally and physically, and left them with almost no energy to spare.

Please, for the love of everything that is holy, let the last ride be something peaceful... like the teacups, or a carousel.

Hinami seemed to have read his mind, somehow, because she pointed her finger toward an enormous metal wheel. She grinned as they all turned and gazed at the ferris wheel, which was lit up in a spectrum of colors.

"If we're talking last rides, you know it's gotta be the ferris wheel, right? Right?!" Hinami exclaimed with a grin.

The rest of the group nodded in unison.

*

"Was there *really* a need for us to split up into two groups?" Asahi wondered out loud.

"They must want to spend some private time together—being a couple and everything," Fuyuka replied.

"What kind of flirting would they be doing that they don't already do in front of us?"

Asahi felt—although it was by no means a complaint—like he had spent a significant amount of time alone with Fuyuka today. He guessed the motive behind being divided into pairs might've also been due to the limited space of the ferris wheel passenger cars. Whatever the case, the two pairs had mounted the ride separately.

“But man, that haunted house lived up to its name, huh?”

“I’d rather not think about it, if that’s all right.”

“Never knew you had screams like that in you.”

“I told you to forget about that!” she protested loudly, blushing in embarrassment.

Sorry to break it to you, Fuyuka, but you can’t just press a button and forget things like that.

His chest was tormented by an array of turbulent sensations when he looked across the car at Fuyuka. It irked him that he still couldn’t place a finger on *quite* what the feeling that constantly assailed him was, but that was an issue for another time. He wanted to focus on engraving the scenic townscape stained in sunset into his memory.

“Did you have fun today?” he asked.

“Of course. I have fun every day I’m with you.”

“I appreciate it, but I didn’t do much. Hell, it was Hinami who invited you to the amusement park, not me.”

“That’s true, but you were the one who introduced us to begin with.”

“I guess you’re not wrong.”

Man, I still don’t get why Fuyuka feels so indebted to me.

Asahi put his musings aside for the time being and concluded that it would be a good time to ask her for clarification. He readjusted himself in his seat and saw Fuyuka smile softly. Although she’d come to smile often in the short time they’d known each other, he still couldn’t help but to be captivated by it.

Silence filled the passenger car as it neared the zenith of its trip around the

wheel.

Suddenly, the stillness was interrupted by a whisper.

“I’m so happy that I met you, Asahi.” Fuyuka, painted orange by the rays of evening sunset, chuckled happily to herself.

Everything threatened to reduce Asahi’s brain to mush. “I’m glad we got to know each other, too,” he replied.

As he confessed his sincere emotions, Asahi came to a staggering realization—he was equally grateful to *her*. And although he had no gripes with his previous day-to-day lifestyle, they had felt somewhat empty before he’d met her.

I’ve never really spent as much time with anyone else. All these activities—preparing meals together, sitting around the same table, studying, chatting about whatever, watching TV and laughing, and sometimes even playing games together—have become part of my daily life before I even realized it.

“Not long until we’re at the top,” Fuyuka said.

The earrings she wore glittered wonderfully in the evening sun.

“Yeah.”

Another brief period of silence ensued before Fuyuka bashfully strung some words together. “I’m actually going to see my mother next week, and I was wondering if it would be okay if I talked to her about you.”

“Fine by me, but... There wouldn’t be much to tell, would there?”

“I disagree—all the days I’ve spent with you have been so fun, and I’ve been really happy. I have lots of stories I’d like to tell my mother.”

Asahi stared wordlessly at Fuyuka as she talked. As he did, it finally occurred to him what the name of the emotion he felt toward her might be. It was a simple word; an emotion that everyone felt toward someone else at least once in their life.

The car reached the apex of its journey into the crimson sky and hung there for a moment before it leisurely began to descend back down again.

Chapter Twelve

The Himuro Household

Beep, beep, beep...

Fuyuka groaned in protest at the alarm clock's rude awakening. It wasn't as though she *wasn't* a morning person, but her drowsy body demanded more sleep all the same. She briefly considered giving into the impulse and falling back into the warm embrace of her futon.

Such were the nonchalant thoughts Fuyuka indulged in as she welcomed the start of a new day.

"I've got to get up," she said, forcing herself up.

The curtains produced a satisfying *whoosh* as she parted them, and brilliant rays of morning sunshine spilled in through the window. Fuyuka greeted them with a yawn. She then stretched her body to its full height, basking in the sun.

"Nice weather today," she remarked as she gazed at the blue sky, which was dotted sparsely with a few white clouds.

Fuyuka moved to the living room and put the morning weather forecast on the TV. An attractive anchorwoman declared that it would be sunny for the rest of the day. Leaving the TV running in the background, Fuyuka headed for the bathroom to quickly wash her face and perform her skincare routine. Then, she entered the kitchen and made herself a slice of toast with jam.

The clock on her wall indicated that it was almost 7:00AM—about the time she'd normally set out for school on weekdays. On free days, she might've started reading around this time, or—if she'd made plans for the day—she would prepare.

As it happened, she had a very important appointment, one that only came once per year. She was going to meet her mother who lived incredibly far away.

Fuyuka changed into proper clothes and combed her hair meticulously.

She lifted her cherished ribbon up in her hands and stared at it for a long

moment. To some, it might've looked like a run-of-the-mill accessory, but it meant the world to her. It was the first present she'd ever received from her mother. Years of use had worn the ribbon down, its color a shadow of its former vibrancy, but—through some finesse and care—Fuyuka managed to keep it in usable condition.

For as long as she could remember, fixing her ribbon on a lock of her hair had been the finishing touch during her morning routine. Things had changed recently, however, and quite contrary to Fuyuka's expectations for her life.

She had another valued accessory to wear now—the snowflake earrings. She put them on, looked at herself in the mirror, and failed to stifle a small laugh. Though she thought that it was a bit creepy to be smiling at herself in the mirror, she really couldn't help herself.

She regained her composure and checked her phone. *Any minute now*, she thought. Not a moment later, her intercom rang.

Realizing she had spent too much time in front of the mirror, Fuyuka scrambled to get her bag ready for the day. She slipped into her favorite shoes and opened her front door.

"Apologies to have kept you waiting, Lady Fuyuka," a sonorous voice greeted her.

"Tachibana. How many times have I asked you to please not call me 'Lady'?" Fuyuka, although disgruntled, greeted the suited woman waiting outside in a matter-of-fact tone.

Kaori Tachibana—the maid serving the Himuro household—bowed in response. "I'm certain you're aware, my lady, that I cannot accommodate such a request."

Fuyuka didn't necessarily want her maid to act overly casual, but the term sounded stuffy to her. She didn't consider herself to possess such towering status that being called a "Lady" would be warranted. Being lauded as such caused her discomfort—it reminded her of how it felt to be called "The Ice Queen."

"Right this way, please," Kaori urged.

Fuyuka followed her to a car that was waiting for her outside the entrance of the apartment complex.

While Fuyuka gave off an air of wealth, a dedicated chauffeur would be a little excessive. As such, Kaori played the role of driver as well. Her duties stretched the typical definition of what a maid was, but—in Kaori's own words—she was entrusted with assisting Fuyuka however the girl might've needed it, including being her driver.

The car pulled out slowly and the cityscape soon began to surge by the windows rapidly. The initially familiar streets would promptly be replaced by scenery that was more vague in Fuyuka's mind. It awakened a sudden fit of aching nostalgia in her that grew as they traveled.

Fuyuka's heart was seized by sadness as they drew closer to their destination, and a restless sigh escaped her. Although she by no means disliked visiting her mother, she wasn't precisely looking forward to it, either. Whenever this day rolled around, she was unable to puzzle out how she should feel.

"Do you need fresh air, my lady?" Kaori, ever attentive to Fuyuka's mood and needs, asked before rolling down the window.

The crisp early morning breeze blew in, cool and refreshing.

Now that I think about it, winter wasn't too bad this year.

The fragrance of flowers wafted into the car, suggesting the arrival of spring. That meant that the school's closing ceremony was fast approaching and would be immediately followed by spring break.

I'm going to have a lot of free time on my hands. I'd like to work on my cooking skills with Asahi, but I wonder if it would be selfish of me to ask during his holiday. Hmm... We could also make progress on our homework together like we did during winter break.

A certain part of her also harbored a desire to go out somewhere with Asahi again. She wanted to have another wonderful day like she'd had at the amusement park.

"You seem happy, my lady. Did something good happen recently?" Kaori asked when she noticed Fuyuka smiling to herself in the rearview mirror.

“No, nothing in particular,” she replied with a small shake of her head. “I was just thinking I have a lot of things I want to tell Mother.”

“About Mr. Kagami, I presume?”

“H-How did you know...?”

“I’m afraid you’re easy to read, my lady.”

“Asahi says the same thing...”

“You brought him up again,” Kaori teased with a smile. Fuyuka’s eyes widened in shock, and her face began to blush. “But, in all seriousness, you’ve been mentioning him quite often as of late. I simply put two and two together.”

I might’ve spoken too much about Asahi without noticing it. I’m not usually all that talkative, but—thinking back on it—I do feel like I’ve mentioned our time together recently.

“Do I really talk that much about him?”

“You most certainly do.”

“In what way, specifically?”

“You mentioned those earrings, for instance, and how—” Kaori was interrupted by Fuyuka, who was visibly panicking in the back seat. The woman paused, deep in thought, then continued, “You truly have changed, my lady.”

It’s true, though there’s one thing I’d correct in that statement.

“It’d be more true to say that I was *allowed* to change,” Fuyuka clarified. She didn’t need to say who was to thank for that—the wheels had been set into motion the day she’d met *him*. “Thank you for always putting up with me, Tachibana.”

“My apologies, Lady Fuyuka. I’m sorry that I haven’t been able to assist you.”

“Please don’t apologize. *I* was the one who fell into a dark place and shut you out.”

Memories of when she’d adopted a frosty attitude toward Kaori, who supported the independent lifestyle she led, were still fresh in her mind.

“Please don’t burden yourself, my lady. Seeing you with a smile on your face

is all I could ever ask for.”

She stopped the car, turned to Fuyuka, and smiled with gentle eyes. Fuyuka nodded in response, stepped out of the car, and retrieved her belongings from the trunk.

She was on her own as she traced the elaborately twisting walkway.

Where should I even start?

A new story sprung to mind with each step she took. When she finally arrived in front of her mother, Fuyuka broke out into a poignant, blissful smile.

“Hi Mother, it’s been a while.”

*

Fuyuka felt drained from all the story telling she’d done. The pleasantly shining sun hung directly overhead, providing her with a warm reminder that her time here had come to an end. Fuyuka was understandably hesitant to bid farewell to her mother, but she knew she would come again. The fact made her feel better about it all.

“I have to go now. I’ll see you later, Mother.”

Fuyuka softly waved goodbye and made to turn back to the path she had followed to arrive.

“Yuki...na?”

The muttered name almost made Fuyuka’s heart stop. She found a tall, slender man staring at her wide-eyed.

“Father,” she timidly greeted the man who stood across from her.

The words seemed to snap him out of his trance. His face was grave.

“Ah. It’s you, Fuyuka,” he said in monotone.

She couldn’t remember the last time he’d called her by her name. That fact made her realize how long it had been since she’d talked to the man at *all*. She tried her best to speak to him, stuttering and attempting to string words together.

Her father ignored her struggling and simply stated, “You haven’t changed.”

With that, he coldly walked past Fuyuka without a second glance.

He was Makoto Himuro—the man Fuyuka called “Father.”

Fuyuka remained frozen in place, left stranded in a sea of loneliness. Her father’s cold gaze shattered any illusion of acknowledgement, and his dismissive words bore into her mind. How could she not have changed?

“I’m very different since we last met, Father,” Fuyuka whispered to herself, her head hung low.

A gust of frigid wind blew by, pushing a group of aimless clouds in front of the sun. The clouds soon began to weep, pelting cold rain down on her.

*

The only family Fuyuka had for a long time was her mother, Yukina Ayatsuji. Her biological father had been absent for as long as Fuyuka could remember. She didn’t know his name, or what he looked like.

Presented with such a cruel hand in life, Yukina, a single mother, had to go through great pains to balance her job and her duty as a parent. Still, she’d succeeded in nurturing Fuyuka into a bright and elegant young lady; a sweet child who was always full of smiles.

In spite of this, Fuyuka couldn’t deny that she yearned for a father figure of some sort. The nature of her family situation meant she would spend a lot of time alone, occasionally for days on end.

Yukina tried her best to love her enough that she’d be able to fill the void in Fuyuka’s heart. Even after she came home after a long day at work, she would fulfill her responsibilities toward her daughter without fail. She would cook dinner, pamper Fuyuka, and attend to the housework. On her days off, she would play with Fuyuka and take her out to various public attractions. And, once Fuyuka had grown tired and drifted off after a full day’s worth of having fun, she would always hum a soothing, gentle lullaby that guided Fuyuka to a world of delightful dreams.

Fuyuka harbored a single, innocent wish—for the wonderful times with her

mother to continue forever.

One day, Fuyuka woke up from sleep.

“Mother?” she asked to the room.

It had been an ordinary weekday like any other, save for one striking exception—Yukina, who would normally be up preparing breakfast by then, had curiously overslept.

She wouldn’t open her eyes despite Fuyuka’s repeated cries, and even shaking her body garnered no response.

“Mommy, wake up! Mommy, Mommy!” Fuyuka pleaded, her concern quickly changing into panic.

Yukina’s skin was terrifyingly cold and so pale that Fuyuka questioned whether there was any blood running through her veins at all. It didn’t take long for Fuyuka to discern that something was seriously wrong. She decided to call an ambulance, so she hastened toward the landline. As she was about to dial the last digit of the emergency number, a yawn interrupted her.

“Huh... What time is it?” Yukina asked, raising herself out of bed and stretching.

“Mommy, are you okay?!” Fuyuka yelled, clinging onto her mother with teary eyes.

“Whoa. What’s wrong, Fuyuka? Someone sure is needy this morning.” Yukina comforted Fuyuka, caressing her head.

“I was so scared! You wouldn’t wake up...”

“Aww, you were worried about me?”

“Mhm.”

“Thanks, Fuyuka, but don’t worry. Everything will be fine. Mommy will always be here for you.”

Fuyuka had endeavored to adopt a more mature attitude now that she was going to become a middle schooler, but she couldn’t bring herself to leave her mother’s comforting embrace.

“Crap, it’s this late already?! Oh god, I’m gonna be late for work!” Yukina eyed the alarm clock and tried to stand up while Fuyuka still clung to her. “What the...”

Suddenly, she collapsed to her knees and didn’t move. Fuyuka saw beads of sweat forming on Yukina’s forehead and noted that she was shivering, despite the mild weather outside.

Fuyuka frowned worriedly. “Are you sure you’re okay, Mommy?”

Yukina just gave her a pained smile, trying to reassure Fuyuka. Ultimately, her mother had taken a sick day, and Fuyuka—despite her protests—had been sent off to school.

A few uneventful days passed. One day, Fuyuka and her mother received a visit from a stern-looking man.

“Hello, it’s nice to meet you. My name is Makoto Himuro,” he introduced himself concisely. “You’re Fuyuka, right? I hope we can get along.”

Fuyuka was immediately afraid of him. He was not only a total stranger, but a brusque and seemingly ill-tempered man to boot. He inched closer to Fuyuka, squatted down to her level, and looked her in the eye.

“Mommy...” Fuyuka, who had never been particularly shy around strangers, hid behind her mother’s back.

“Awww, did he scare you?” Yukina consoled her.

“That’s odd. I read that you’re supposed to talk to children at eye level,” Makoto said.

“You’ve *got* to work on that grim expression of yours. Smile more. Oh, and you should fix your tone too—it’d intimidate any child. Maybe aim to sound at least a *bit* friendly.”

“Kids are complicated,” he grumbled.

Yukina giggled, which, in spite of Makoto’s solemn features, did somewhat reassure Fuyuka. Even she could tell that their relationship had more to it than they were letting on.

“Let me introduce him to you, Fuyuka. This old man here is a friend from

when I was in university.”

“Hey, what do you mean, ‘old man’? We’re the same age.”

“Let’s not sweat the small stuff.”

According to Yukina, she and Makoto had coincidentally ran into each other again through work and stayed in contact.

As it had happened, Makoto had become quite successful. He’d started his own business and managed a number of enterprises as the CEO. The level of conversation proved too difficult for Fuyuka to fully understand, but, on a basic level, even *she* could comprehend that he was some sort of a big deal.

Yukina went on to speak at length about the past. Makoto listened in unbroken silence. Although Fuyuka wasn’t an active participant of the conversation, she, strangely enough, didn’t feel left out at all. She was still wary of the man she’d just met, but she was nevertheless happy to watch her mother smile as she talked. It was a different kind of smile than any Fuyuka had seen.

After chatting with Yukina for a rather long time, Makoto—who had only appeared to check on her—went back home.

“I don’t get him,” Fuyuka remarked.

“Haha, I know what you mean,” Yukina said, appearing somewhat pleased.

From then on, Makoto would stop by their house from time to time, bringing presents for Fuyuka from his second visit onwards.

At first, she was taken aback by this. The fact that they were mostly toys she didn’t want didn’t exactly help the situation, either. Still, by the time around half a year had passed, she’d grown used to it.

The three of them once decided to go to an amusement park and took a souvenir photo together, where they had been mistaken for a family. The flustered expression on Yukina’s face, and—more surprisingly—Makoto’s, stuck in Fuyuka’s mind.

There was also another, more prominent memory: Yukina and Makoto dressed to the nines in a fancy restaurant, and Makoto on one knee with a ring.

Fuyuka, who had been preoccupied with the exquisite tourin soup, hadn’t

completely understood what was happening. Still, she didn't feel pressed to object to this development, or the fact that her mother had been crying at that time.

She'd naturally accepted Makoto as her new father. She'd also sincerely and naively believed that their happiness, while in a new form, would continue on forever.

Chapter Thirteen

Freezing Rain

The rain poured and the turbulent wind howled outside.

Contrary to the morning forecast which had predicted a clear day—at least, as far as Asahi could remember—the weather was horrid. The room was quite cold despite the fact that it was already March, and it almost appeared as if winter had made a second coming.

The cityscape outside was a sea of colorful umbrellas, hiding the faces of the soggy pedestrians from view. It was certainly one of those gloomy days where Asahi was reluctant to take a step outside. He would rather, if possible, spend the entirety of it relaxing in bed instead. Luckily for him, there was no school leading up to the year's closing ceremony, which meant he was free to laze about to his heart's content.

He rested his head against his pillow and closed his eyes, serenaded by the falling rain and raging wind. The image of a certain girl flashed across his mind—Fuyuka, who was going to visit her mother. Her words from the day before sprang into his mind. She'd told him that, although she may return late, she would still love to have dinner with him.

Wonder if she's telling her mom about me right now, Asahi wondered. The thought made him smile.

He'd found that everything he did as of late involved her to some degree. If he were to describe it, it was like his world had started to revolve around her.

There's no denying it—she's become a big part of my life.

He opted to crawl out of bed for the time being and try to clear his mind. "Maybe I should go do some shopping..."

I'd honestly prefer to stay indoors and take it easy if I could, but...

He consulted his fridge, which remained cruelly sparsely stocked despite his desire to remain indoors. If he were only cooking for himself, he would've just

thrown something together with what he had. Considering who his guest was, though, he wouldn't settle for that.

In the end, his aversion toward cutting corners won out over his disdain for walking in a heavy downpour.

Asahi was planning to include eggs—her favorite ingredient—in the meal. The thought of Fuyuka enjoying his cooking and complimenting it for being delicious provoked his lips to curve into a smile.

Fully dressed and ready to go, Asahi was about to face the freezing weather when the cellphone inside his pocket vibrated.

He had received a new message. As he slipped on his shoes, he opened the messaging app and found a concise text from Fuyuka.

“Something urgent came up and I can't make it to dinner tonight. I'm sorry.”

“Got it,” Asahi replied.

He sensed something ominous in the message, the first time in a while he'd felt this way.

A lighting strike illuminated the room in sharp white for an instant as a clap of thunder roared in the sky.

*

“Turns out Fuyu-Fuyu's not gonna be here today,” Hinami said.

“Yup, looks like it. Got a couple of friends throwing a tantrum, saying it was a waste of time to come to school today,” Chiaki added.

It was a few days later at school. The closing ceremony had concluded, and Asahi and his friends had made their way to school to help with the graduation ceremony arrangements.

Lunch break had arrived before long, and the table they'd occupied at the cafeteria had a conspicuously vacant seat. Although the couple had been surprised when Fuyuka hadn't shown up that morning, her absence had only truly sunk in when they saw the empty seat.

The reason for her absence had become the subject of gossip amongst the

students. The leading theories ranged from the inoffensive—like catching a cold or attending a memorial service—to the outlandish and controversial. A surprising amount of people speculated that she'd simply overslept.

The truth was anyone's guess, but it was obvious that all the students were worried about Fuyuka's well-being.

"You haven't heard anything from her, Asahi?" Hinami asked.

"Nope, radio silence. What about you?"

"Nada. I'm getting pretty antsy. Fuyu-Fuyu's not reading, like, *any* of the texts I send her."

"Same here. I've heard even the teachers don't know what's up," Chiaki added.

Like with Hinami, Fuyuka hadn't read Asahi's messages.

It wasn't out of the ordinary for most friends to go a handful of days without exchanging messages; Asahi would even argue that it demonstrated a degree of intimacy between them. However, what had been the span of just a few days had felt like months for Asahi, especially given their daily routine.

She would also always reply to Asahi—both in real life and through messaging—even if it was just small talk. Communicating with her had become a staple of his life. As he was confronted with the ominous feeling that it might be taken away, he didn't quite know what to do with himself.

"Maaan, I wanna meet up with Fuyu-Fuyu soon! I miss her."

"My Lady Hina, is the company of these two fine gentlemen inadequate for a lady of your caliber?" Chiaki teased.

"That's not what I meant..."

Asahi knew precisely what she had meant, and he knew Chiaki was the same. The three of them together had been the standard... until Fuyuka had come into their lives.

"Hey, guys, why don't we go check up on her? Maybe she got sick, or something," Hinami suggested.

“I mean, we don’t know that for sure. Besides, let’s say she *did* catch something—it wouldn’t exactly be a good idea for all of us to go see her, would it?”

“Asahi absolutely *destroying* me with facts and logic!”

“Fair enough. Then why don’t you go alone, dude? Your place is pretty close to hers, right?” Chiaki proposed vaguely, as if he wasn’t aware that Asahi and Fuyuka were quite literally neighbors.

“Oooh, nice idea, Chii-pie! I’m sure he’s worried sick about Fuyuka too!”

Did he phrase it like that so others wouldn’t overhear and get the wrong idea? Maybe I’m giving him too much credit—something about that smirk doesn’t sit right with me.

“I’ll think about it,” he replied as he finished his meal.

His vague response happened to coincide with the chime of the bell, indicating the end of the lunch break.

*

Classes were over, and Asahi found himself standing before the door to Fuyuka’s apartment.

He’d resolved to try contacting her through the intercom today, even before Chiaki had suggested it. If she’d gotten sick, he intended to nurse her back to health, just like when they’d met. This time around, though, he believed she’d be willing to accept his help.

Asahi drew a deep breath and pushed the intercom, and a familiar *dingdong* rang out. A gust of chilly wind blew through the extended foyer, piercing Asahi’s rain-drenched uniform. Soon, he heard the door unlock with a *click*.

“You okay?”

As soon as he saw the state she was in, the ominous feeling that had tormented Asahi sprang up once again. He was able to tell at a glance that Fuyuka was affiliated with some sort of illness, though it didn’t seem physical.

The helpless girl standing across from him looked so fragile.

“I’m not okay...” she managed to squeeze out in a frail voice.

There was no need for any further words to be exchanged between them. Asahi extended his arm toward her and gently took her wrist in his hand. He silently led her by the wrist, and she followed.

Her face seemed similar to when they first met, but it was also somewhat different.

Chapter Fourteen

How to Melt the Ice Queen's Heart

Fuyuka sat in silence. Her face was grave and her eyes betrayed no signs of life. It was almost as if she'd returned to her old self, frosty and withdrawn.

Asahi was the first to speak. "Anything I can do to help?"

He couldn't stand to see her like this. There was no way he could just let it be. It had been the same when he first met her.

She hadn't said much yet, but her earlier utterance had made it clear enough that something was wrong.

"You're always the one to reach out to me, Asahi." She spoke as if she was in a daze. A sad smile quietly spread across her face. "I'm going to tell you something about my past. Is that all right with you?"

Asahi nodded. He could see that she was going out of her way, straining behind her smile, and her resolve urged him on. No matter how many times it took, he'd bring warmth with him whenever he was allowed into her glacial world.

"It was always just me and my mother," she began. "I'm told my father left while I was still just a baby. We didn't have any other relatives to rely on, so my mother raised me by herself. After a while, a man named Makoto Himuro began coming to our house. He was... scary. He was brusque and inexpressive. Still, I thought he was a good person at heart. He was nice to Mother, at least... After a while, I thought we had become a family."

Asahi was reminded of the day Fuyuka had left her phone behind. Her wallpaper had been a photo of her as a child with two adults. One had obviously been her mother, but the other—a tall man in a suit—had seemed out of place. Asahi presumed that that was Makoto Himuro, and his intuition about the man had been right. He looked nothing like Fuyuka, and now it was obvious why—the two weren't related by blood.

"I thought we had become a family." Asahi dwelled on the ominous words.

“One day, Makoto proposed, and my mother agreed to marry him. She was crying. I thought that was because she was happy—what reason would a child have to think any differently? We were like a family.” Fuyuka’s face softened as she reminisced on old memories, but the expression soon faded. A sigh crawled out of her mouth. “My mother collapsed a few days after that.”

Although she generally looked happy when she’d discussed her family before, Asahi had never been able to shake the feeling that there was a quiet sadness hidden in her expression. The fact that he had been right didn’t feel even remotely satisfying.

“My mother had worked so, so hard to do her job and raise me. She paid for it by contracting a serious illness,” she continued. Her voice wavered in a thinly veiled attempt to stay calm.

“You don’t have to talk about this if it’s too much,” Asahi reassured her.

He knew in his mind that she probably didn’t want to be having this dark, depressing conversation, and that she was forcing herself. That was the last thing he wanted.

Fuyuka shook her head. The look in her eye told him that, while she understood his feelings, she wanted him to hear her story.

“My mother was hospitalized. She died not long after.” Fuyuka spoke in a cold, matter-of-fact tone, as if she was giving a report. Her hair fell in front of her face and hid her expression. “I cried until I couldn’t anymore, I couldn’t even speak when I was done. Makoto took me in after that. He informed me that my mother had told him about her condition, and that he’d asked her to marry him because of that. I’m sure my mother had been crying out of *some* kind of happiness, but it was much more complicated than that.”

Fuyuka paused to take a breath, then returned to her story. “I was at my wit’s end, and I think Makoto was the same. He had always been a busy person, but he often stopped coming home after her death. I was left by myself a lot. Once Tachibana started working for us, he disappeared completely. He has a duty of care to me, but that’s it. He only ever loved my mother, not me. School was difficult after that, too. My circumstances became something of a talking point, and—while I’m sure there was a lot of kindness and concern for me in those

discussions—some of it didn't feel that way. One by one, my peers withdrew from me.”

The more Asahi heard about Fuyuka's past, the heavier the feeling in his chest grew.

“My mother, my father, my friends... They all left me. No, I was the one who withdrew. My mother dying, my father leaving, my friends cutting ties with me... if you trace all that back to its source, you find me. That's what I ended up thinking, at least. It hurt so much that I wished I'd never gotten close to anyone in the first place. If I didn't get close to anyone, no one could ever hurt me.”

Asahi finally knew the truth about The Ice Queen.

He had his own experiences with losing a family member. His parents were busy people, so he'd often been looked after by his grandfather. Unfortunately, he'd passed away. To this day, he remembered the feeling—it was as if a hole had opened in his heart. He also recalled that his family and his friends had been the ones to help fill that hole.

That was how it should've been for Fuyuka, as well, but there hadn't been anyone there for her. She'd had no choice but to withdraw from the world given her circumstances, struggling forward all on her own. She became hard and focused, refusing to speak to anyone more than necessary. She grew distant and cold—an ice queen. It had always been a defense mechanism to protect an injured heart.

Asahi felt like his chest was going to burst from a storm of emotions.

“I tried to study hard and keep my body in check so I could live alone, but I could never cook as well as my mother. Over time, both my mental and physical health got worse and worse...”

She was getting into the time period that Asahi had known her, but all the new information she'd just provided was making him rethink that. He wondered just how much Fuyuka had been suffering in the time he'd known her. He couldn't even begin to imagine... and even if he could, what exactly could he have done to help her?

Her voice grew warmer as she continued, “But then I met you. You were there

for me when I caught a cold, when I was hungry, and when I lost my ribbon... I thought that I'd be able to push you away, just like I was able to do with everyone else, but your warmth reached me. I wanted to take the hand you offered me."

"I'm not good at minding my own business..."

"And I'm so grateful for that. Because of you, I learned how important connecting with others is. You gave me the courage to do that. That's why I'm scared. Now people can leave me again. I don't want that..."

Each word pierced Asahi's chest like a spear, and he saw a single tear trickle down her cheek. That reminded him that he'd seen Fuyuka cry once before. He hadn't known what she'd meant when she'd said "This dish brings back memories..." back then, but he did now.

She'd seen her mother in him when he'd cooked for her. The warmth she'd been trying to avoid for years had once again appeared in front of her, and it had brought her to tears. And now she was choosing to bare her emotions in front of him.

Asahi didn't want her to cry; he didn't want to upset her. He looked at the frail girl in front of him, who looked like she'd crumble in a light breeze, and all he wanted was for her to smile.

That was why he simply said the first thing that came to mind—without a single thought about the consequences. "I won't leave you."

There was a hint of falsehood in his words, but they managed to find their mark regardless. Fuyuka's expression changed, and her caramel-colored eyes brightened for a fleeting moment before her face fell once again. The warmth that had started to fill the room was snuffed out in an instant.

Asahi didn't let this dissuade him, though. "You said you wanted to change, right?"

"Yes..."

"And look, there're so many people who want to get to know you now—Hinami, Chiaki, our classmates, even my parents. You know that, right?"

“Yes...”

Asahi felt that she'd reached some kind of limit, one that prevented her from going any further at the moment. Yet he knew in his heart that she'd heard and felt his words. She'd made that first step out into the unknown, and it had frightened her so much that she retreated back into the cold depths she had grown familiar with.

Still, that step—no matter how small—had been real, a sign of progress.

“You're right that there'll be people who come and go. Things change—classes, schools, our paths in life...” he said.

It was the cruel truth—although a person could make hundreds of friends in their lifetime, only a small handful of them would carry through onto one's adulthood and beyond. Despite that fact, that inevitable parting, humans craved relationships. And, for this fragile girl, even the most trivial of partings would split old wounds wide open.

Asahi wanted to do anything in his power to soothe those wounds.

He faced her head-on as he swore his oath. “So I promise that, at the very least, I won't leave you.”

He needed her to know that, even if everyone else left her, he'd always be there by her side. He needed her to believe that he'd always be there to support and to help her. He extended his warm hand once again.

“Even when we graduate?”

“We live next to each other. It won't make much of a difference.”

“What if you move?”

“I'll call you. It's the twenty-first century.”

“What if you don't like me anymore?”

“That won't happen.” His resolve hardened as he spoke.

“So you promise... Promise to never, ever leave me?”

“I promise. Well, I guess if you ever *want* me to leave, I'll have no choice. But you know...”

“That won’t happen.”

“Great, then don’t worry at all. I’ll always be with you. I promise.”

Even if he were to move away and change schools, their companionship would never end as long as she still desired it.

They both knew it wasn’t a promise to be made lightly, but the fact that they made it anyway was proof of their trust in each other... and perhaps proof of something even more.

“That makes me... So happy...”

Her voice was packed with so much emotion that Asahi couldn’t parse it all. All he knew was that he loved to see her smile.

“It’s been tough for you, hasn’t it? And you’ve been all alone...” he murmured.

Before he knew what he was doing, he found his hand reaching out toward Fuyuka, placing itself on top of her head, and caressing it lightly.

He didn’t know what he was doing; he simply wanted to help her feel better. He didn’t see it as a meaningful action, but Fuyuka’s body shook under his touch.

“You’re treating me like a baby...”

“Sorry... I didn’t mean it like that...”

“Why are you stopping?”

“You want me to, right?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Asahi’s right hand hovered in the air while he wondered what to do. Before he could decide, two small hands reached up and pulled his back toward her head.

“I’d like to stay like this for a while... If that’s okay,” she murmured.

He answered her request and began to gently run his fingers through her beautiful black hair.

“Can I say one last thing?” Asahi asked, albeit he had no intention of waiting for an answer. “Obviously, I don’t know all the details, but one thing’s for sure—it wasn’t your fault your mother died, Fuyuka. From what you’ve said, I can tell that she loved you from the bottom of her heart. That’s the truth.”

For some time after that, the sound of crying could be heard throughout the room. All of the emotions that Fuyuka had bottled up inside finally burst forth. He could feel her shaking through his hand and the dampness of her tears falling onto his knee.

He watched over her silently, determined that—no matter what happened—his hand would not leave her head.

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“You feeling any better now?” he asked.

“Yes, but please don’t look at me...”

“What’s the problem?”

“I don’t want you, of all people, to see me like this...”

Asahi wondered where he was supposed to be looking then. He ended up glancing at her by accident and noticed that her already red face had grown a shade darker.

At any rate, he was just glad she wasn’t crying anymore.

“Can we continue our conversation?” Fuyuka asked. She wiped her tears and began to speak again, “A few days ago, it was the anniversary of my mother’s death. I visited her grave, and—for the first time in a long while—I saw my father. He didn’t even look at me. That’s what made me start thinking about the past.”

“And that’s why you were off school, I’m guessing?”

“I just got so scared. I couldn’t face the idea of you leaving me, so I couldn’t see you...” The shadow returned to Fuyuka’s eyes for a fleeting moment before she brightened up again. Her relief shone through in a small smile. “But I don’t feel that way anymore. It’s all thanks to you, Asahi.”

He knew that claiming to remain by someone’s side was a lie that was all too

common in poorly made promises, he meant what he'd said. In the short span of their relationship, a strong sense of trust had formed between the two.

"I know I've said it several times before, but I really *am* glad I met you, Asahi."

When Asahi saw her beaming smile, something finally clicked into place inside his head. Well, it was more that he finally *decided* to let it click after a period of ignoring it and trying to fool himself. He'd left his feelings unchecked for so long that they threatened to boil over at that very moment.

When he looked at Fuyuka, he experienced a strange feeling.

It also occurred when he thought about how beautiful she was.

It also occurred when he thought about how wonderful she was.

It also occurred when he thought about how cute she was.

And so, he finally came to a realization—he knew the name of the enigmatic emotion.

He was in love with her.

After that thought had passed through his mind, the world somehow seemed brighter and more vivid.

"Asahi, are you blushing?"

"Uh, no. Are you?"

"Um, n-no, I'm not..."

In an attempt to ignore the embarrassment, he returned to stroking her head. Fuyuka accepted gladly.

"When you do this, I feel all warm and fuzzy," she said.

"What's up with that?"

"I'm trying to say it calms me down."

"Oh, cool. Let me know whenever you want me to do it, then."

"Thank you..."

Warmth. The Ice Queen had thawed and melted away, never to return.

Chapter Fifteen

Asahi's Affection

The rain had wept, the wind had wailed, the thunder had bellowed, and the snow had piled up into elegant mounds. A harsh winter was always followed by the warmth of spring and the sun's brilliant rays.

In contrast to the thawing earth around him, one boy didn't seem to enjoy the heat. In fact, he was currently being consumed by the flames of passion.

God, why did I have to go and tell her that I won't leave her... That was seriously cringe.

Asahi groaned, burying his face deep into his pillow. He recalled yesterday's events and felt embarrassed, to say the least. He'd made the promise in the heat of the moment, but now that his mind was calm, the words brought him nothing but shame.

It's not that I regret telling her how I feel. That's not the issue here. It was just so embarrassing, man! I don't think I've ever been this worked up about something.

He could still feel Fuyuka's hair as he stroked it in his right hand, and her expressions—from the tears she'd shed to her cheery smile—were engraved firmly in his memories. Asahi had finally awakened to his feelings of affection toward her, and it burned deep within his chest.

Even the sound of the intercom ringing made him smile. That alone demonstrated that he had a severe case of the sickness known only as "love."

He fixed his hair in front of the mirror for no particular reason, then went to open the door.

He found a beautiful girl standing on the other side. He managed to maintain his composure and welcomed her in.

"What a day at school, huh? You were getting swarmed even more than usual."

“I never knew everyone had been so worried about me. Now I feel pretty guilty about my absence,” Fuyuka replied.

She’d returned to her normal self today; it was almost as though yesterday had been a fever dream.

Asahi did his best to ignore the pounding in his chest as they indulged in some small talk in his apartment’s spacious kitchen. The fact that Fuyuka could maintain a conversation whilst carrying out cooking preparations only showed how much her culinary skills had grown.

Finally, about 10 minutes later, the table was furnished with a variety of dishes. The main dish, which prominently featured egg, was especially eye-catching.

“Delicious... the soup tastes exactly like the one your parents make.” Fuyuka’s eyes twinkled as she enjoyed her food.

Asahi had resolved to prepare the soup for her after he’d heard the dark tale of her past.

Her tragic, complicated family circumstances had enclosed Fuyuka’s heart within a layer of solid ice. Still, she’d been able to form *some* happy memories. Her visit to Soleil Levant and the Kagami-style tourin soup she’d thoroughly enjoyed was one example.

If a warm meal could help heal Fuyuka’s wounds, even a little bit, then it was Asahi’s earnest wish to provide her with just that.

“Thank you so much, Asahi. I know you made this with me in mind.”



“You could say that. Sorry for not minding my own business again,” Asahi apologized.

“No, no, don’t apologize. This makes me really happy, actually. Your kindness is something that I really...” her voice trailed off, leaving the sentence unfinished.

“‘Something that you really’ what?”

“Ah, no, it’s nothing. Forget about it.”

“Yeah, as if that’s ever worked. It just makes me more curious. C’mon, I really wanna know.”

Fuyuka shook her head. “I’m not telling.”

“Fine, just tell me the first couple of letters of whatever it was,” he insisted, unwilling to let it go.

Fuyuka reluctantly uttered, “It’s one of your qualities that I really... *L-O*. There!”

“Well, that could be anything.”

“You asked for the first *couple* of letters. That’s all you’re going to get.”

Before he’d realized it, this sort of lighthearted banter had become a cornerstone of his life. He thought back over his more recent memories and realized that a vast majority of them were centered around Fuyuka.

Geez, I’m head over heels for her. I really do love her.

Their gazes met.

“Your cooking really *is* the best,” she praised him.

Fuyuka’s compliment, which was accompanied by a pleasant smile, sent Asahi’s heart into overdrive. Every single word she spoke, and every single thing she did—no matter how trivial—struck him to his core.

Guess your whole world turns upside down once you’re in love.

It was a cliché, to be sure, but one that was absolutely true in his case. Fuyuka had been able to completely occupy his thoughts, and Asahi became overly

mindful of any conversation they had together.

You can't exactly go back once you take notice of these emotions.

He truly hoped that Fuyuka's incomplete confession overlapped with the love he had for her.

"That was a good meal," he said.

"It was amazing. You should teach me how to make it again in the future."

"Yeah, good idea. Can't expect you to get it after just one time."

"Hmph, are you underestimating me? Just wait—I'll definitely learn it next time!" Fuyuka declared, puffing her cheeks out indignantly.

Although such interactions were the norm for these two, the emotions Asahi felt were more fervent than ever.

There's no need to rush anything. We're both still in our first year of high school. We'll take it slow for now, as friends.

Still, Asahi was determined to eventually confront the feelings he harbored for Fuyuka—the first he'd ever developed for anyone.

Chapter Sixteen

Fuyuka's Affection

After she closed the door behind her, she waited for the *click* of the lock being set behind before she squatted down in the hallway and buried her head in her arms. Her heart beat so loud that she was genuinely worried the noise might leak through the wall.

"Asahi, you bully... making me say the first couple of letters was so unfair..." she whispered to herself, her face flushed red.

Since when had those various swirls of emotions united under the definition of a single, four-letter word?

Fuyuka remembered the first time she'd seen Asahi—it was when he'd just moved in next to her. She'd observed him caught between two adults with strikingly contrasting personalities. One was a large, boisterous man, and the other was a quiet, composed woman.

After she'd returned to her apartment, she stared blankly at the large, empty room. The loneliness within her began to grow.

I'm so jealous of his happy family, she'd admitted to herself.

Before long, Asahi, planning to introduce himself to his new neighbor, paid her a visit.

Unfortunately for him, he'd been promptly warded off by Fuyuka's cold demeanor.

"The Ice Queen" had kept to herself, refusing to involve herself with her new neighbor in the slightest. She spent her time alone.

Of course, it was only a matter of time before that all changed.

It had happened so suddenly, too... I suppose that's what I get for not eating properly. Still, I didn't feel anything out of the ordinary back then. I thought I could handle a small fever on my own.

"You okay?" Fuyuka remembered his words.

Despite her clouded mind, she'd distinctly heard the clear voice and, recognizing that it belonged to her neighbor, promptly put up her frosty walls.

I didn't want to get hurt by anyone ever again.

At the time, Fuyuka had closed her heart away, refusing to trust anyone.

"Would it have been better if I left you, passed out, in the middle of the hallway? Would you have preferred that?" Asahi's firmly spoken words sprang to her mind.

It had been quite the emergency. And while Fuyuka had had her fair share of reservations about being carried into a guy's room alone, those suspicions had been quelled by Asahi's meddlesome, selfless nature.

Without being given a chance to object, she'd been nursed through her illness and even treated to a warm meal. The nostalgic taste had caused tears to well up and drip down her cheeks, unbidden.

The burden she bore, both physical and mental, was significant, yet she despised herself for being weak. Despite that, she knew deep down that she would eventually become overwhelmed, and she'd be unable to stop herself from yearning for a genuine connection with another person.

And so two conflicting desires had raged within her—her wish to be left alone versus the need to repay Asahi's kindness. Being indebted to someone caused her profound unease. After much back-and-forth, they'd settled on Fuyuka helping him with his studies.

She thought they'd soon be even, and that she'd be able to go back to her previous life. It was then that the constant grumbling of her stomach had foiled her plans.

Fuyuka had reluctantly ended up accepting his invitation to join him for some homemade curry. She'd found herself inadvertently engaging in small talk with him, which was how he'd deduced the fact she had lackluster culinary skills.

Fuyuka even remembered smiling when hearing Asahi's encouraging speech about how it didn't matter if she wasn't able to cook properly or not.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd smiled in front of anyone back then.

And, by the time Fuyuka had realized her lapse, it had already been too late to shift back to her frigid countenance.

I just let my guard down around him, for some reason.

The conversations she'd had with Asahi warmed her, and she—for the briefest of moments—had related that happiness to the one she'd felt when she'd still had her mother. Regardless of how many times she'd warned herself that she shouldn't—no, that she *mustn't*—desire more from their relationship, Asahi had continued to offer her a helping hand whenever she'd needed it.

“Just be sure to not lose it again, especially considering how much you care about it.”

Asahi's admonishment rang in her head again. She remembered staring fixedly at the boy before her, her prized ribbon in his hand. That had been when Fuyuka had finally acknowledged the feelings she'd ignored and had tried to hold at bay for so long.

I think that was when I began to notice him.

Her neighbor, whom she hadn't considered even a friend at that point, was the first person to offer a glimmer of hope to her dark soul. Following various and unforeseen mishaps, Asahi had ended up tutoring her on cooking. That, of course, had marked the start of the rather roundabout route they'd taken to becoming actual friends.

Following that, they'd spent a lot of time together. Asahi had invited her to Soleil Levant, asked her to welcome the new years together at his apartment, and joined her for the first shrine visit of the year.

Through it all, Fuyuka had acquired new friends, changed her outlook on life, and been provided with the opportunity to become more familiar with Asahi. The more she had, the more she'd become attracted to him.

I'm head over heels for him. I love him so much.

“I won't leave you, huh?” she parroted his words, jumping onto her bed and burying her face deep into the pillow.

The impulse proved too strong to withstand, and she soon found herself

kicking against the mattress with her legs. Although Fuyuka still couldn't muster the courage to confess, she'd allowed her true feelings out of their ice-cold cage; she'd let someone get truly close to her.

I like our current relationship, and he said that he'll always be by my side. We can take it at our own pace... as friends. There's no need to rush anything.

Still, Fuyuka was determined to eventually confront the feelings she harbored for Asahi—the first she'd ever developed for anyone.

Afterword

Hello, it's Kakeru Takamine. I tried to come up with a nice way to begin the afterword, but nothing came to mind. Whoops.

From a purely narrative perspective, I'd consider this volume to conclude the main theme of this little story.

In volume one, Asahi and Fuyuka go from being strangers to becoming friends. In this volume, the relationship deepens into a romantic one. Fuyuka opens up about her past to Asahi, and he, in turn, becomes her confidant and trusted partner. Every relationship has a story behind it, and these two are no exception. Sure, they had to go through a couple extra hurdles along the way compared to others, but the result was still a happy one, right?

Although the continuation of this series has yet to be decided by my publisher, if it were to happen, I'd like to expand on what happens after this volume. Would Fuyuka and Asahi stay as they are, or would they grow even closer?

There's also been word of an English translation for this series to be released soon, which comes as a surprise to me. I've always been terrible at English, and it was never something I took very seriously back in school. I never would've guessed that it would come back to haunt my dreams, hahaha. I wish Fuyuka or Asahi could teach me how English works—that'd be great.

Some other people I'd like to thank...

To Mr. Takada, my editor in charge of the series—we haven't had as much time to meet, but I feel as if we've grown closer in the past few months working on the novel together. I appreciate that you gave me complete creative freedom. I also appreciated the idle conversations we had about random subjects, which helped me come up with a lot of ideas for this novel, as well as many others. Thank you very much. Let's make these conversations more frequent!

I also want to thank my Illustrator, Ichigo Kagawa. Even though Kagawa is a busy person, he managed to completely blow my expectations away with his

brehtaking illustrations. He also made one of the most beautiful covers I've ever seen—I would seriously like to turn it into a family heirloom.

Thank you to everyone involved in the production of this book in any way, shape, or form, as well as to the readers who decided to get their hands on this book.

I think that's enough rambling, so I'll finish the afterword here. Let's hope we meet again in another story—or potentially another volume of Ice Queen—in the future.

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